A. BERTRAM CHANDLER'S GREAT NEW NOVEL

SPARTAN PLANET FIRST PUBLICATION ANYWHERE

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# FANTASTIC

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# FANTASTIC

MARCH, 1968 VOL. 17, NO. 4

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# WHAT IS FANTASTIC?

## Editorial by Harry Harrison

Very recently the Russians soft-landed a device on the planet Venus which chirruped out messages for 90 minutes before expiring in a puff of smoke. It said a number of things, that may or may not be revealed after its constructors analyze its electronic bagpipe messages, but it has already said enough to us. It has kicked the supporting physical planks out from under a great deal of our literature. The seas and fogs of fiction have evaporated, and been replaced by what might be called venera firma. Carson Napier has landed with a solid thud and his Slaves of the Fishmen are free of their piscine masters at last. There will be no more stories of the fog-shrouded planet. (Well, I suppose there *will* be, but you won't read them here.)

Does this mean that fantasy, the sense of wonder, the lure of the unknown and mysterious are dead? Not in the slightest. We just have to look somewhere else for it. How about the U.S. Marine Corps? That is not as strange as it sounds. In the same issue of the newspaper where I read about the Russian Venus probe, I read an item about the Marine Corps in Camp Pendleton, California. It was titled "DIVINING ROD TIPS AT BOOBY TRAPS" and was about how to detect punji pits and mines with the aid of bent coat hangers. These divining rods were brought to the attention of the Marines by Louis J. Matacia, who is an operations analyst at the Landing Forces Development Center in Quantico, Virginia. It seems that Matacia saw land surveyors and construction engineers using the rods to find underground pipelines. They worked. He tried them. They worked for him. He told the Marines about them and they worked for the Marines. Even though no one knows why.

Simply, these divining rods are lengths of L-shaped metal held loosely in the hands. (If you want more of a description and instructions on how to make your own, complete details may be found on page 221 of John W. Campbell's COLLECTED EDITORIALS FROM ANALOG, published by Doubleday.) When used by most people—not all people—they will turn and quiver and point to buried pipes, foreign objects, water, etc. Since they do not work for everyone, and no one has come up with a satisfactory explanation of their theory of operation, they are not being scientifically investigated. I won't go into the whys of this lack of investigation, other individuals cover that topic thoroughly and often, though I could make a suggestion to Mr. Matacia. Get a grant. The government pork-barrel is sloshing over. In the latest release I have received from NASA I see that the University of Michigan has received $47,500 "To Determine the Scope and Cause of Notch Sensitivity of Materials Under Creep-Rupture Conditions." While Pennsylvania State is getting $105,000 for "Theoretical and Analytical Research on Electron Densities in the Ionosphere." Now I don't intend to knock research


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# SPARTAN PLANET

*First of Two Parts*

*Sparta is man's world—inhabited only by men. It has been that way—they think—since the beginning of time. This can lead to some strange and interesting problems . . . particularly when a spaceship lands with strange, twin-turreted aliens abroad . . .*

## A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

Illustrated by JEFF JONES

### Chapter 1

THERE was that sound again—thin, high, querulous, yet audible even above the rhythmic stamp and shuffle of the dance that beat out through the open windows of the Club. It sounded as though something were in pain. Something was.

Brasidus belched gently. He had too much wine taken, and he knew it. That was why he had come outside—to clear his head and, he hoped, to dispel the slight but definitely mounting waves of nausea. The night air was cool, but not too cool, on his naked body, and that helped a little. Even so, he did not wish to return inside just yet.

He said to Achron, "We may as well watch."

"No," replied his companion. "*No.* I don't want to. It's . . . dirty, somehow . . ." Then with a triumphant intonation he delivered the word for which he had been groping. "Obscene."

"It's not. It's . . . natural." The liquor had loosened Brasidus' tongue, otherwise he would never have dared to speak so freely, not even to one who was, after all, only a helot. "It's we who're being obscene by being unnatural. Can't you see that?"

"No, I can't!" snapped Achron pettishly. "And I don't want to. And I thank Zeus, and his priesthood, that *we* don't have to go through what that brute is going through."

"It's only a scavenger."

"But it's a sentient being."

"And so what? I'm going to watch, anyhow."

Brasidus walked briskly to where the sound was coming from, followed reluctantly by Achron. Yes, there was the scavenger, struggling in the centre of the pool of yellow light cast by a



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street-lamp. The scavenger—or scavengers . . . Had either of the young men heard of Siamese twins that would have been the analogy to have occurred to them—a pair of Siamese twins fighting to break apart. But the parallel would not have been exact, as one of the two linked beings was little more than half the size of the other.

Even in normal circumstances the scavengers were not pretty animals—although they looked functional enough. They were quadrupedal, with cylindrical bodies. At one end they were all voracious mouth, and from the other end protruded the organs of excretion and insemination. They were unlovely but useful, and had been encouraged to roam the streets of the cities from time immemorial.

Out on the hills and prairies and in the forests their larger cousins were unlovely and dangerous—but they had acquired the taste for living garbage.

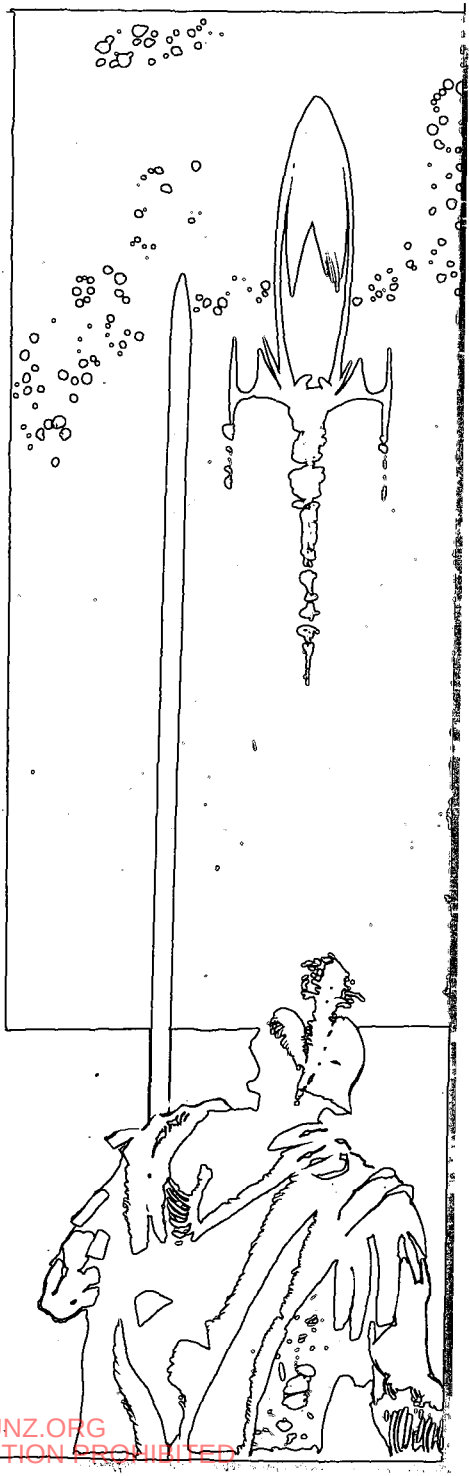
"So . . . messy," complained Achron.

"Not so messy as the streets would be if the beasts didn't reproduce themselves."

"There wouldn't be the same need for reproduction if you rough hoplites didn't use them as javelin targets . . . But you know what I'm getting at, Brasidus. It's just that I . . . It's just that some of us don't like to be reminded of our humble origins. How would *you* like to go through the budding process, and then have to *tear* your son away from yourself?"

"I wouldn't. But we don't have to, so why worry about it?"

"I'm not *worrying*," Achron—slightly built, palely blond—looked severely up into the rugged face of his darkly muscular friend. "But I really





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don't see why we have to watch these *disgusting* spectacles."

"You don't have to."

The larger of the scavengers, the parent, had succeeded in bringing one of its short hind legs up under its belly. Suddenly it kicked, and as it did so it screamed, and the smaller animal shrieked in unison. They were broken apart now, staggering over the cobbles in what was almost a parody of a human dance. They were apart, and on each of the rough, mottled flanks was a ragged circle of glistening, raw flesh, a wound that betrayed by its stench what was the usual diet of the lowly garbage eaters. The stink lingered even after the beasts, rapidly recovering from their ordeal, had scurried off, completing the fissioning process, in opposite directions.

That was the normal way of birth on Sparta.

## Chapter 2

That was the normal way of birth on Sparta—but wherever in the Universe there is intelligence there are also abnormalities.

Achron looked at his wristwatch—the instrument and ornament that marked him as something more than a common helot, as almost the social equal of the members of the military caste. He said, "I have to be getting along. I'm on duty at the creche at 2400 hours."

"I hope you enjoy the nappy changing and the bottle feeding."

"But I do, Brasidus. You know that I do." His rather high voice dropped to a murmur. "I always feel that one or two of them might be . . . yours. There *are* a couple in this new generation that have your nose and eyes."

Brasidus put a large, investigatory and derisory hand to his face. "Impossible. I've still got them."

"Oh, you know what I mean."

"Why not keep a look-out for your own offspring, Achron?"

"It's not the *same*, Brasidus. In any case, it's not often I'm called upon to contribute . . ."

The two friends walked back to the Club House, but did not go further inside than the cloakroom. Brasidus watched Achron slip into his tunic and sandals—then, on an impulse, followed suit. Somehow he was no longer in the mood for the dance, and his prominent nose wrinkled a little at the acrid smell of perspiration and the sweet-sour reek of vomit and spilled wine that drifted into the anteroom from the main hall. The thudding of bare feet on the polished floor, in time to the drums and the screaming, brassy trumpets, usually excited him, but this night it failed to do so, as even did the confused shouting and scuffling that told him that the inevitable brawl had just broken out. On other occasions he had hurled himself gleefully into the press of struggling, sweating, naked bodies—but this, too, had lost its attraction for him.

More and more he was feeling that there was something . . . missing, just as there had been something missing when he had been a guest at Achron's club. He had thought, at the time, that it was the boisterous good fellowship, the hearty food and the strong, rough wine. Now he had sated himself with all of these, and was still dissatisfied.

He shrugged his heavy shoulders, then tugged the hem of his tunic down to its normal mid-thigh position.



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He said, "I'll stroll down to the Creche with you, Achron. I don't feel like going back to the Barracks just yet—and, anyhow, tomorrow's my free day."

"Oh, thank you, Brasidus. But are you sure? Usually you hate to leave while there's any wine left in the jars . . ."

"Just don't feel like any more drinking or dancing. Come on."

It was dark outside the building. The sky, although clear, was almost starless, and Sparta had no moons. The street lamps on their fluted columns were widely spaced, seemed to accentuate the blackness rather than to relieve it, and the glimmering white pillars of street-fronting buildings appeared to be absorbing rather than reflecting what little light there was. In their shadows there was furtive movement, but it was no more than the scavengers going about their appointed tasks. Then, overhead, there was the drone of engines.

Brasidus stopped abruptly, laid a detaining hand on Achron's upper arm. He looked up, staring at the great, shadowy bulk that drove across the night sky, its course set for the blinking beacon atop the Acropolis, its tiers of ports strings of luminous beads, its ruby and emerald navigation lights pendants at the end of the necklace.

Achron said impatiently, "*Come* on. I don't want to be late clocking in. It's only the Night Mail from Helos. You must have seen it *dozens* of times."

"At least," agreed Brasidus. He fell into step again beside his companion. "But . . ."

"But you always wanted to join the Air Navy yourself, Brasidus. But you're too big, too heavy. A pity." There was a hit of spite in Achron's voice.

Brasidus recognized it, but ignored it. He murmured, "And there are even better things to be than an airman . . . I've often wondered why *we* didn't build any more spaceships after we colonised Latterhaven, why we allowed the Latterhaveneers to have the monopoly of the trade between the two worlds . . . We should own and operate our own spaceships."

Achron laughed unkindly. "And what chance do you think you'd have of being a spaceman? Two ships are *ample* for the trade, and the spice crop's only once a year. What would you do between voyages?"

"We could . . . explore."

"Explore?" Achron's slim arm described an arc against the almost empty sky. "Explore—*what?* And on the other side of the world there's the Lens—and we all know that it's no more—or less—than a vast expanse of incandescent gases."

"So we've been told. But . . . I've managed an occasional talk with the Latterhaven spacemen when I've been on spaceport guard duty, and *they* don't think so."

"*They* wouldn't. Anyhow, you could be a lot worse things than a soldier—and in the police branch of the army at that. And as far as the possibility or otherwise of other worlds is concerned I'd sooner listen to our own priests than that athiestical bunch from Latterhaven."

They were almost at the Creche now—a huge, sprawling adjunct to the still huger Temple. Its windows glowed with soft, yellow light, and above the main doorway, in crimson neon, gleamed the insignia of the State Parenthood Service, the red circle from



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which, at an angle, a barbed arrow jutted up and out. Brasidus wondered, as he had wondered before, how the Creche had come to take for its own the symbol of Ares, the God of War. It was, he supposed, that the highest caste into which a child could grow was, after the priesthood, the military. Then he thought about his own alleged parenthood.

"These babies like me . . ." he said abruptly.

"Yes, Brasidus?"

"I . . . I think I'll come in with you, to see for myself."

"Why not? It's outside visiting hours —not that anybody does ever visit— but you're a police officer. Old Telemachus at the desk won't know if you're on duty or not."

Telemachus, bored by his night duty, welcomed the slight deviation from normal routine. He knew Brasidus slightly but, nonetheless, insisted that he produce his identity card. Then he asked, his wrinkled head protruding turtle-like from his robes, "And what is the purpose of your visit, Sergeant? Has some criminal taken refuge within our sacred precincts?"

"Achron tells me that two of his charges might be . . . mine."

"Ah. *Potential* criminals." The old man cackled at his own humour. "But seriously, Sergeant, it is a great pity that more of our citizens do not evince greater interest in their sons. Even though the direct physical link was abolished ages ago there should still be responsibility. Yes. Responsibility. Before I was asked to resign from the Council I succeeded in having the system of regular visiting hours introduced—not that anybody has taken advantage of them . . ."

"Phillip will be waiting for his relief," broke in Achron sulkily.

"So he will. But it will not hurt that young man to be kept waiting. Do you know, at the 2200 hours feed he failed to ensure that the bottles were at the correct temperature! I could hear Dr. Heraklion carrying on, even out here. Luckily the doctor came into the ward at just the right time . . ." Telemachus added spitefully, "I honestly think that Phillip will make a better factory hand than a children's nurse."

"Is the correct temperature so important, sir?" asked Brasidus curiously. "After all, we can eat hot things and cold things, and it never seems to do us any harm."

"But we are fully developed, my dear boy. The children are not. Before the priests learned how to improve upon nature a child, up to quite an advanced age, would be getting his nourishment directly from the father's blood stream. So—can't you see?— these immature digestive organs must be coddled. They are not ready to handle what we should consider normal food and drink."

"Phillip will be in a bad temper," complained Achron. "I hate him when he's that way."

"All right than, you can relieve your precious Phillip. Are you sure you don't want to stay on for a talk, Brasidus?"

"No thank you, Telemachus."

"Off you go, then. And try not to make any arrests."

Brasidus followed his friend through long corridors and then into the softly lighted ward where he was supposed to be on duty. They were met at the door by Phillip, a young man who, save for his dark coloring, was almost



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Achron's twin. He glowered at his relief. "So you've condescended to show up at last. I should give you something to help you to remember to get here on time."

"Do just that," said Brasidus roughly.

Phillip stared insolently at the Sergeant and sneered, "A pity you brought your *friend* with you. Well, I'm off, dearie. It's all yours, and you're welcome to it."

"What about the hand-over procedure?" demanded Achron sharply.

"What is there to hand over? Fifty brats, slumbering peacefully—until they all wake up together and start yelling their heads off. Thermostat in the dispenser's on the blink, so you'll have to check bottle temperatures before you break out rations for the little darlings. Clean nappy bin was replenished before the change of watch—or what *should* have been the change of watch. I'm off."

He went.

"Not really suitable for this profession, is he?" asked Achron softly. "I sometimes think that he doesn't *like* children . . ." He gestured towards the double row of white cots. "But who couldn't love them?"

"Not you, obviously."

"But come with me, Brasidus. Leave your sandals by the door and walk softly. I don't want them woken." He tip-toed on bare feet over the polished floor. "Now," he whispered, "I'll show you. This is one of them." He paused at the foot of a crib, looked down lovingly.

And Brasidus looked down curiously. What he saw was just a bud, a baby, with a few strands of wispy black hair plastered across the overlarge skull, with unformed features. The eyes were closed, so he could not tell if there were any optical resemblance between himself and the child. The nose? That was no more than a blob of putty. He wondered, as he had often wondered, how Achron and the other nurses ever told their charges apart. Not that it much mattered, not that it would matter until the boys were old enough for aptitude tests—and by that time all characteristics, psychological and physiological, would be well developed.

"Isn't he *like* you?" murmured Achron.

"Um. Yes."

"Don't you feel . . . proud?"

"Frankly, no."

"Oh, Brasidus, how *can* you be so insensitive?"

"It's a gift. It goes with *my* job."

"I don't believe you. Honestly, I don't . . . But quiet. Heraklion's just come in . . ."

Brasidus looked up and saw the tall, white-robed figure of the doctor at the end of the aisle. He bowed stiffly, and the salutation was returned. Then Heraklion beckoned. Remembering to walk softly the young man made his way between the row of cots.

"Brasidus, isn't it?" asked Heraklion.

"Yes, Doctor."

"What are you doing here, Sergeant?"

"Just visiting, with Achron."

"I really don't approve, you know. Our charges are very . . . delicate. I shall appreciate it if you don't go wandering all over the building."

"I shan't be doing that, Doctor."

"Very well. Goodnight to you, Sergeant."

"Goodnight to you, Doctor."



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And as he watched the tall, spare figure of Heraklion striding away along the corridor Brasidus, the policeman in his make-up suddenly in the ascendant, asked himself, *What is* he *hiding?*

And then the first of the babies awoke—and almost immediately after the other forty nine of them. Brasidus bade a hasty farewell to Achron and fled into the night.

## Chapter 3

There was an odd, nagging suspicion at the back of Brasidus's mind as he walked slowly through the almost deserted streets to the Police Barracks. Normally he would have been attracted by the sounds of revelry that still roared from the occasional Club—but the mood that had descended upon him earlier still had not left him, and to it was added this new fretting surmise. Crime was not rare on Sparta, but it was usually of a violent nature and to cope with it required little in the way of detective ability. However, crime against the State was not unknown—and the criminals were, more often than not, highly placed officials, better educated and more intelligent than the commonality. There was a certain smell about such malefactors—slight, subtle, but evident to the trained nose.

Brasidus possessed such an organ—and it had twitched at the odour that lingered about the doctor, Heraklion.

Drugs? Could be—although the man himself did not appear to be an addict. But, in his position, he would have access to narcotics, and the peddlars had to get their supplies from *somebody*.

Even so, Brasidus was reluctant to pass his suspicions on to his superiors. To begin with, there was no proof. Secondly—and this was more important—he had witnessed what had happened, more than once, to over-zealous officers who had contrived to trample on the toes of the influential. To present his captain with a *fait accompli*, with all the evidence (but of *what?*) against Heraklion neatly compiled, would be one thing, would almost certainly lead to promotion. To run to him with no more than the vaguest of suspicions, no more than a hunch, actually, could well result in permanent banishment to some dead-end hamlet in the bush.

Nonetheless, an investigation *could* bring rewards and, if carried out discreetly and in his own time, would not be too risky. After all, there was no law or regulation to debar any citizen from entry to the Creche. Now and again, at the instigation of members like Telemachus, the Council had attempted to encourage visits, although with little success. Perhaps a sudden access of parental feeling would look suspicious—but calling to see a friend, one of the children's nurses, would not. Too, Achron himself might have noticed something odd, might even be induced to remember and to talk about it.

"What's biting you, Sergeant?" asked the bored sentry on duty at the barracks gate.

Brasidus started. "Nothing," he said.

"Oh, come off it!" The man had served with Brasidus for years and was shortly due for promotion himself, would be permitted liberties. "Anybody'd think you had a solid week's guard duty ahead of you, instead of your free day . . ." The



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sentry yawned widely. "How was the dance, by the way? It's unlike you to be back so early, especially when you've a morning's lay-in for recuperation."

"So-so."

"Any good fights?"

"I don't know. There seemed to be one starting just as I left."

"And you didn't join in? You must be sickening or something. You'd better see a doctor."

"Maybe I'd better. Goodnight, Leonidas—or should it be good morning?"

"What does it matter to *you?* You'll soon be in your scratcher."

On his way to his sleeping quarters Brasidus had to pass the Duty Sergeant's desk. That official looked up as he approached. "Oh, Brasidus . . ."

"I'm off duty, Lysander."

"A policeman is *never* off duty—especially one who is familiar with the routine for spaceport guard duties." He consulted a pad on his desk. "You, with six constables, are to present yourself at the port at 0600 hours. The men have already been told off for the duty, and arrangements have been made to have you all called. You'd better get some sleep."

"But there's no ship due. Not for *months.*"

"Sergeant Brasidus, you and I are policemen. Neither of us is an expert on astronautical matters. If the Latterhaveneers decide to send an unscheduled ship, and if the Council makes the usual arrangements for its reception, who are we to demand explanations?"

"It seems . . . odd."

"You're a creature of routine, Brasidus. That's your trouble. Off with you now, and have a little sleep."

Once he had undressed and dropped on to the hard, narrow bed in his cubicle he did, rather to his surprise, fall almost at once into a dreamless slumber. And it seemed that only seconds had elapsed when a orderly called him at 0445 hours.

A cold shower completed the arousing process. He got into his black and silver uniform tunic, buckled on his heavy sandals and then, plumed helmet under his arm, made his way to the mess hall. He was the first one there. He looked with some distaste at the already laid table—the crusty bread, the joints of cold meat, the jugs of weak beer. But he was hungry, and pulled up a form and began his meal. As he was eating the six constables of his detail came in. He nodded in greeting as they muttered sullenly, "Morning, Sergeant." Then, "Don't waste any time," he admonished. "They'll be waiting for us at the spaceport."

"Let 'em wait," growled one of the latecomers. He threw a gnawed bone in the general direction of the trash bucket, missed.

"That's enough from you, Hector. I hear that there's a vacancy for a village policeman at Euroka. Want me to recommend you?"

"No. Their beer's lousier even than this, and they can't make wine."

"Then watch your step, that's all."

The men got slowly to their feet, wiping their mouths on the backs of their hands, half-heartedly dusting the crumbs from the fronts of their tunics. They took their helmets from the hooks on the wall, put them on, then filed slowly from the mess hall to the Duty Sergeant's desk. He was waiting for



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them, already had the armoury door unlocked. From it he took, one by one, seven belts, each with one holster. So, thought Brasidus, this was an actual spaceship landing. Staves and short swords were good enough for ordinarly police duties. As the belts were being buckled on the Duty Sergeant produced the weapons to go with them. "One stun gun," he muttered, passing them out. "One projectile pistol. To be used only in extreme urgency. But you know the drill, Sergeant."

"I know the drill, Sergeant," replied Brasidus.

"We should," grumbled Hector, "by this time."

"I'm telling you," explained the Duty Sergeant with ominous patience, "so that if you do something silly, which is all too possible, you won't be able to say that you weren't told not to do it." He came out from behind the desk, inspected the detail. "A fine body of men, Sergeant Brasidus," he declaimed sardonically. "A credit to the Army. I don't think. But you'll do, I suppose. There'll be nobody there to see you but a bunch of scruffy Latterhaven spacemen."

"What if they aren't from Latterhaven?" asked Brasidus. He was almost as surprised by his question as was the Desk Sergeant.

"Where else can they be from? Do you think that the gods have come all the way from Olympus to pay us a call?"

But if the gods came it would be, presumably, on the wings of a supernal storm. It would not be a routine spaceship arrival—routine, that is, save for its unscheduled nature.

The men were silent during the ride to the spaceport outside the city.

Air-cushioned, the police transport sped smoothly over the cobbled streets of the city, the rough roads of the countryside. Dawn was not far off and already the harpies were uttering their raucous cries in the branches of the medusa trees. One of the birds, its wings whirring about its globular body, swept down from its perch and fluttered ahead of the driver's cab, squawking discordantly. The vehicle swerved. Hector cursed, pulled his projectile pistol, fired. The report was deafening in the still air. The harpy screamed for the last time and fell, a bloody tangle of membrane and cartilage, by the side of the road.

"Was that necessary, hoplite?" asked Brasidus coldly.

"You heard what Sergeant Lysander told us, Sergeant." The man leered. "This was an emergency."

*Only a bird,* thought Brasidus. *Only a stupid bird. Even so . . .* He asked himself, *Am I getting soft? But I can't be. Not in this job. And in all my relationships I'm the dominant partner . . .*

The spaceport was ahead now, its latticework control tower looming starkly against the brightening yellow of the eastern sky. The spaceport was ahead, and atop the signal mast the intense green light was flashing that warned of incoming traffic. A ship was due. *Latterhaven Venus* or *Latterhaven Hera?* And what would either of them be doing here off season?

The car halted at the main gates, sitting there on the cloud of dust blown up and around it by its ducts. The guard on duty did not leave his box, merely actuated the mechanism that opened the gateway, waved the police through. As they drove to the



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Spaceport Security Office Brasidus saw that the inner barrier was being erected on the concrete apron. He noticed, too, that only one conveyor belt had been rigged, indicating that there would be very little cargo either to load or to discharge. That, at this time of the year, made sense—but why should the ship be coming here at all?

They were outside the office now. The car stopped, subsided to the ground as its fans slowed to a halt. The constables jumped out, followed Brasidus into the building. To meet them there was Diomedes—corpulent, pallid, with a deceptively flabby appearance—the Security Captain. He returned Brasidus' smart salute with a casual wave of his pudgy hand. "Ah, yes. The guard detail. The usual drill, Sergeant. You're on duty until relieved. Nobody, Spartan or Spaceman, to pass through the barrier either way without the Council's written authority." He glanced at the wall clock. "For your information, the ship is due at 0700 hours. You may stand down until 0650."

"Very good, sir. Thank you, sir," snapped Brasidus. "If I may ask, sir, which of the two ships is it?"

"You may ask, Sergeant. But I'm just Security. Nobody ever tells me anything." He relented slightly. "If you *must* know, it's neither of the two regular ships. It's some wagon with the most unlikely name of *Seeker III.*"

"Not like the Latterhaveneers to miss out the name of their precious planet . . ." muttered somebody.

"But, my dear fellow, the ships' not from Latterhaven. That's the trouble. And now, Sergeant, if you'll come with me I'll try to put you into the picture. It's a pity that nobody's put me into it first."

## Chapter 4

The ship that was not from Latterhaven was no more than a glittering speck in the cloudless morning sky when Diomedes, followed by Brasidus and the six hoplites, marched out from the office on to the apron, to the wire mesh barrier that had been erected to define and to enclose the strange vessel's landing place. It was no more than a glittering speck at first, but it was expanding rapidly, and the rhythmic beat of the Inertial Drive, faint to begin with, was becoming steadily louder.

Old Cleon, the Port Master, was there, his long white hair streaming out in the breeze. With him were other officials, one of whom carried a portable transceiver. Brasidus could overhear both ends of the conversation. He learned little; it was no more than the exchange of messages to be expected with standard landing procedure. Cleon himself did not seem to be very interested. He turned to Diomedes. "Most unprecedented!" he complained. "Most unprecedented. Had it not been for the Council's direct orders I should have refused permission to land."

"It's not a very large ship," said Diomedes, squinting upwards.

"Large enough. Too large, for an intruder. Those rebels on Latterhaven might have let us know that they've discovered and colonized other habitable planets."

"They, too, must have a Security Service," said Diomedes.

"Secrets, secrets! How can I run a spaceport when nobody ever tells



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me anything? Answer me that, Captain!"

"Descending under full control, to area designated," reported the man with the transceiver.

Diomedes turned to his men. "I've told Sergeant Brasidus all that I know, and he's passed it on to you. So keep alert. We're not expecting any hostile action—but be ready for it. That's all."

Brasidus checked the freedom of his weapons in their holsters. The others followed his example.

Lower dropped the ship, lower. Even with nothing against which to measure her it could be seen that she was small—only half the size, perhaps, of *Latterhaven Venus* or *Latterhaven Hera*. The gold letters embossed on her side were now readable. *SEEKER III*. (And what, wondered Brasidus, of *SEEKER I* and *SEEKER II*?) And above the name there was a most peculiar badge or symbol. A stylized harpy it looked like—a winged globe surmounted by a five pointed star. It was nothing like the conventional golden rocket worn by the Latterhaveneers on their uniforms.

Lower dropped the ship, and lower, coming at last between the waiting men and the rising sun, casting a long, chill shadow. The throbbing of its engines made speech impossible—and then, suddenly augmenting their beat, there was the drone of other machinery. Slowly, majestically, no less than six of the great airships of the Spartan Navy sailed over the spaceport and then, in line ahead, circled the landing field. Their arrival was clearly not fortuitous. Should *Seeker's* crew attempt any hostile action they, and their ship, would be destroyed by a shower of high explosive bombs—as would be, Brasidus realized, the military ground party and the port officials. The same thought must have occurred to Diomedes. The portly captain looked even unhappier than usual and muttered, "Nobody ever tells me *anything* . . ."

With a crunch of metal on concrete the ship landed, an elongated ovoid quivering on her vaned landing gear, in spite of its bulk somehow conveying the impression that the slightest puff of wind could blow it away. Then, as the engines were shut down, it ceased to vibrate, settled down solidly. There was a loud *crack* and a jagged fissure appeared in the scarred concrete of the apron. But the strange vessel was not especially heavy. The initial damage had been caused by a clumsy landing of *Latterhaven Hera* and Cleon, with months in which to make the necessary repairs, still hadn't gotten around to it.

Slowly an airlock door towards the stern of the ship opened. From it, tonguelike, an extensible ramp protruded, wavered, then sought and found the ground. There were beings standing in the airlock chamber. Were they human? Brasidus had read imaginative stories about odd, intelligent lifeforms evolved on other planets—and, after all, this ship could be proof that there were more habitable planets than Sparta and Latterhaven in the Universe . . . Yes, they seemed to be human. Nevertheless, the Sergeant's hands did not stray far from the butts of his holstered weapons.

Somebody was coming down the ramp, a man whose attire bore no resemblance to the carelessly informal rig of the Latterhaven spacemen. There



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was gold on his visored cap, and a double row of gold buttons on his odd tunic, and bands of gold on the sleeves of it. His black trousers were not the shapeless coverings worn for warmth and protection in the hill country, but were shaped to his legs and sharply creased. His black, highly polished footwear afforded complete coverage—and must be, thought Brasidus, wriggling his toes, extremely uncomfortable. He reached the ground, turned and made a gesture towards the open doorway. Another man came out of the airlock, followed the first one to the ground. He, although his uniform was similar, was dressed more sensibly, with a knee-length black kilt instead of the constricting trousers.

But was it a man, or was it some kind of alien? Brasidus once again recalled those imaginative stories, and the assumption made by some writers that natives of worlds with thin atmospheres would run to abnormal (by Spartan standards) lung development. This being, then, could be deformed, or a mutant, or an alien. Somebody muttered, "What an odd-looking creature!"

Walking with calm deliberation the two men approached the barrier. The one with the trousered legs called, "Anybody here speak English?" He turned to his companion and said, "That was a silly question to which I should get a silly answer. After all, we've been nattering to them on RT all they way in."

"We speak Greek," answered Diomedes.

The spaceman looked puzzled. "I'm afraid that I don't. But your English is very good. If you don't mind, it will have to do."

"But we have been speaking Greek to you from the very first contact."

"Something odd here. But skip it. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Lieutenant Commander John Grimes, Interstellar Federation Survey Service. This lady is Dr. Margaret Lazenby, our Ethologist . . ."

*Lady . . .* thought Brasidus. *Then he must be a member of some other race. The Ladies? I wonder where they come from . . . and such odd names—Johngrimes, and Margaretlazenby . . . But the Latterhaveneers go in for odd names too.*

Diomedes was making his own self-introduction. "I am Diomedes, Captain of Spaceport Security. Please state your business, Johngrimes."

"I've already done so. And, as you must know, I received clearance to land."

"Then state your business again, Johngrimes."

"All right. We're carrying out the Census in this sector of Space. Of course, your cooperation isn't compulsory, but it will be appreciated."

"That is a matter for the King and his Council, Lieutenant Commander."

"We can wait. Meanwhile, I'd like to comply with all the usual regulations and clear my ship inwards. I'm ready to receive the officers from Port Health and Customs as soon as you like . . ."

"We have no need for them here, Lieutenant Commander Johngrimes. My orders are that you and your crew stay on your side of the barrier until such time as you lift off."

The strange looking man was talking to the spaceship captain in a high, angry voice. "But this is impossible, Commander. How can we carry out any sort of survey in these conditions? They distinctly told us that



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we could land—and now they turn their spaceport into a prison camp just for our benefit. *Do* something, Commander."

Brasidus saw the captain's prominent ears redden. Nonetheless he replied mildly enough, "But this is their world, Miss Lazenby. We're only guests."

"Guests? Prisoners, you mean. A wire barrier around us, and a fleet of antique gasbags cruising over us. Guests, you say!"

*Strange*, thought Brasidus, *how this peculiar looking spaceman appears attractive when he's in a bad temper, while poor Achron and his like just get more and more repulsive . . . And why do I compare him to Achron and the others? A finer bone structure, perhaps, and a more slender body—apart from that shocking deformity—and a higher voice?*

Quiet, please!" The owner of the shocking deformity subsided. Johngrimes turned again to the barrier. "Captain Diomedes, I request that you get in touch with some higher authority. I am here on Federation business . . ."

"What Federation?" asked Diomedes.

"You don't know? You really don't know?"

"No. But, of course, I'm Security, so nobody ever tells me anything."

"What a bloody planet," murmured Margaretlazenby. "What a bloody planet!"

"That will do, Peggy," admonished Johngrimes.

*And how many names do these people have?* Brasidus asked himself. Through the wire mesh of the barrier he stared curiously at the Lady. *He must be some sort of alien*, he thought. And yet . . . Margaretlazenby, suddenly conscious of his stare, blushed—then returned his gaze in a cool, appraising manner that, fantastically, brought the blood flooding to the skin of his own face.

## Chapter 5

Brasidus flushed as he met the spaceman's appraising—and somehow approving—stare. He heard him murmur to his captain, "Buy that one for me, Daddy," and heard Johngrimes' replay, "Peggy, you're incorrigible. Get back on board at once."

"But I *am* the Ethologist, John."

"No need to get wrapped up in your work. Get back on board."

"Yes, sir. Very good, sir. Ay, ay, sir."

He looked at Brasidus for a long, last time and then turned with a flounce of kilts. The movement of his hips and full buttocks as he mounted the ramp was disturbing.

"Now, perhaps," said the captain, "we can get down to business. I may be old-fashioned, but I've never cared much for a mixed crew . . ."

"So it's true, Lieutenant Commander," Diomedes said. "So you aren't from Latterhaven."

"Of course not. We shall be calling there after we've finished here. But tell me—what made the penny drop so suddenly?" He grinned. "Or should I have said 'obol'?"

"You speak strangely, Johngrimes. What do you mean?"

"Just a figure of speech. Don't you have automatic vendors? No? What I meant was this. Why should my mention of a mixed crew suddenly convince you that my claim that this is a Federation ship is correct?"



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Diomedes did not answer at once. He glared around at Cleon and his aides, at Brasidus and his men. He growled, "You all of you have ears—unluckily. You all of you have heard far too much. But you will not speak of it. To anybody. I need not remind you of what has happened in the past to men who have breached Security." He turned back to the space captain. "Your arrival here, Lieutenant Commander, has rather upset our notions of cosmogony. It is now a matter for the Council—and for the Council only."

"But why *did* the penny drop?" persisted Johngrimes.

"Because you have brought evidence that there is more than one intelligent race in the Universe. At first we thought that your Margaretlazenby was deformed—on this world, of course, he would have been exposed immediately after birth—and then you told us that you have a mixed crew."

The captain stared at Diomedes incredulously. He said at last, "Of course, it has been said more than once, not altogether in jest, that they aren't really human . . . But tell me, Captain Diomedes, do you actually mean what I think you mean? Haven't you any like her on your planet?"

"Like *what*, Lieutenant Commander?"

"Like her. Like Dr. Lazenby."

"Of course not. We are all human here. As we should be, Sparta being the birthplace of the human race."

"You really mean that?"

"Of course," replied Diomedes.

*But does he?* wondered Brasidus, who had worked with the Security Captain before.

"And you have no . . .?" began the spaceman, then pulled himself up abruptly. Brasidus recognized the signs. *Find out all you can, but give nothing away yourself.*

"We have no what?" prompted Diogenes.

Johngrimes made a quick recovery. "No Immigration, no Customs, no Port Health."

"I've already told you that, Lieutenant Commander. And I've already told you that you and your crew must remain confined to your ship."

"Then perhaps you would care to come aboard, Captain Diomedes, to talk things over."

"Not by myself—and not unarmed."

"You may bring one man with you," said Johngrimes slowly. "But both of you will leave your weapons this side of the barrier."

"We could board by force," said Diomedes.

"Could you? I think not. *Seeker* may be carrying out the Census, but she's still a frigate, with a frigate's armament. In a matter of seconds we could sweep this field—*and* the sky over the field—clear of life. This is not a threat—merely a statement of fact." The words carried conviction.

Diomedes hesitated. "Very well," he said at last. He looked up to the circling airships as though for reassurance, shook his head doubtfully. He addressed Cleon, "Portmaster, please have your radioman inform the Flight Admiral of my movements." He turned to Brasidus, "Sergeant, you may come with me. Leave Leading Hoplite Hector in charge."

Brasidus got close enough to Diomedes so that he could speak in a low, urgent whisper. "But, sir, the Standing Orders . . . The passes,



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to be signed by a member of the Council . . ."

"And who do you think drew up those Standing Orders, Sergeant? *I* am Security." Diomedes unlocked the gate with a key from his belt pouch. "Come with me."

"Your weapons," reminded Johngrimes.

Diomedes sighed, unbuckled his belt with its two holstered pistols, passed it to one of the men. Brasidus followed suit. The Sergeant felt naked—far more so than when stripped for the dance or for field sports. He knew that he still retained one weapon in the use of which he was, as were all members of the police branch of the Army, superbly trained—his body. But he missed those smooth, polished wooden butts that fitted so snugly into his hands. Even a despised sword or spear would have been better than nothing.

Ahead of them Johngrimes was walking briskly towards the open airlock door, towards the foot of the ramp. Diomedes and Brasidus followed. They could see, as they neared the vessel, that the odd excrescences on her skin were gun turrets, that from at least two of them slender barrels were trained upon them, following them, that from others heavier weapons tracked the circling airships.

Johngrimes was taking no chances.

Although he had been often enough on spaceport guard duties this was the first time that Brasidus had been aboard a spaceship; usually it was only Diomedes who boarded visiting vessels. Mounting the ramp, the Sergeant eyed professionally the little group of officers waiting just inside the airlock. The all carried sidearms, and they all looked competent enough. *Even so . . .* though Brasidus. *They'll not be able to use their pistols for fear of hitting each other. The knee to the groin, the edge of the hand to the neck . . .*

"Better not," said Diomedes, reading his subordinate's face.

"Better not," said Johngrimes, turning back to look at the pair of them. "An incident could have unfortunate—for your planet—repercussions."

*Better not,* thought Brasidus.

Soldierlike, he approved the smartness with which the spacemen saluted their captain. And soldierlike, he did not like the feel of a deck under his feet instead of solid ground. Nonetheless, he looked about him curiously. He was disappointed. He had been expecting, vaguely, vistas of gleaming machines, all in fascinating motion, banks of fluorescing screens, assemblages of intricate instruments. But all that there was was a little, metal-walled room, cubical except for the curvature of its outer side, and beyond that another little room, shaped like a wedge of pie with a bite out of its narrow end.

But there must be more to the ship than this.

An officer pressed a button on the far, inwardly curved wall of the inside room. A sliding door moved aside, revealing yet another little compartment, cylindrical this time. Johngrimes motioned to his guests—*or hostages?* Diomedes—but he was familiar with spaceships—entered this third room without any hesitation. Apprehensively Brasidus followed him, with Johngrimes bringing up the rear.

"Don't worry," said Diomedes to



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his Sergeant. "This is only an elevator."

"An . . . an elevator?"

"It elevates you. Is that correct, Lieutenant Commander?"

"It is, Captain Diomedes." Johngrimes turned to Brasidus. "At the moment we are inside the axial shaft—a sort of hollow column running almost the full length of the ship. This cage that we've just entered will carry us up to my quarters. We never use it, of course, in Free Fall—only during acceleration or on a planetary surface."

"Do you have machines to do the work of your legs, sir?"

"Why not, Sergeant?"

"Isn't that . . . decadent?"

The spaceship captain laughed. "Men have been saying that ever since the first lazy *and* intelligent bastard invented the wheel. Tell me, did you march out from the city to the spaceport, or did you ride?"

"That's different, sir," said Brasidus lamely.

"Like hell it is." Johngrimes pressed a button. The door slid shut—and almost immediately Brasidus experienced an odd, sinking sensation in his stomach. He knew that the cage was in motion, felt that it was upward motion. Fascinated, he watched the lights flashing in succession on the panel by the door—and almost lost his balance when the elevator slowed to a stop.

The door slid open again, revealing a short stretch of alleyway. Still there were no machines, no instruments—but the air was alive with the subdued murmur of machinery.

Brasidus had likened the ship to a metallic tower—but this was not like being inside a building.

It was like being inside a living organism.

## Chapter 6

"Come in," said Johngrimes, pushing a button that opened another sliding door. "As a very dear friend of mine used to say, this is Liberty Hall. You can spit on the mat and call the cat a bastard."

"Cat?" asked Brasidus, ignoring an admonitory glare from Diomedes. "Bastard? What are they?" He added, "It's the second time you've used that last word, sir."

"You must forgive my Sergeant's unmannerly curiosity, Lieutenant Commander," said Diomedes.

"A healthy trait, Captain. After all, you are both policemen." He smiled rather grimly. "So am I, in a manner of speaking . . . But sit down, both of you."

Brasidus remained standing until he received a grudging nod from his superior. Then he was amazed by the softness, by the comfort of the chair into which he lowered himself. On Sparta such luxury was reserved for the aged—and only for the highly placed aged at that, for Council members and the like. This Lieutenant Commander was not an old man, was probably no older than Brasidus himself. Yet here he was, housed in quarters that the King might envy. The room in which Johngrimes was entertaining him and Diomedes was not large, but it was superbly appointed. There were the deep easy chairs, fitted with peculiar straps, there was a wall-to-wall carpet, indigo in colour, with a deep pile, on the floor, there were drapes, patterned blue, that obviously concealed other doorways, and there



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were pictures set on the polished panelling of the walls.

They were like no paintings or photographs that Brasidus had ever seen. They glowed, seemingly, with a light of their own. They were three-dimensional. They were like little windows on to other worlds.

Brasidus could not help staring at the one nearest to him. It could have been a typcial scene on his own Sparta—distant, snow-capped peaks in the background, blue water and yellow sand, then, in the foreground, the golden-brown bodies of naked athletes.

But . . .

Brasidus looked more closely. Roughly half of the figures were human—and the rest of them were like this mysterious Margaretlazenby. So that was what he must look like unclothed. The deformity of the upper part of the body was bad enough; that of the lower part was shocking.

"Arcadia," said Johngrimes. "A *very* pleasant planet. The people are enthusiastic nudists—but, of course, they have the climate for it."

"We," said Diomedes, turning his attention to the picture from the one that he had been studying, a bleak, mountain range in silhouette against a black sky, "exercise naked in all weathers."

"You would," replied Johngrimes lightly.

"So," went on Diomedes after a pause, "this Margaret Lazenby of yours is an Arcadian." He got to his feet to study the hologram more closely. "H'm. How do they reproduce? Oddly enough, I have seen the same deformation on the bodies of some children who have been exposed . . . Coincidence, of course."

"You Spartans live up to your name," said Johngrimes coldly.

"I don't see what you mean, Lieutenant Commander. But no matter. I think I begin to understand. These Arcadians are a subject race—intelligent but non-human, good enough to serve in subordinate capacities, but temperamentally, at least, unqualified for full command."

"Dr. Lazenby was born on Arcadia. It's a good job she's not here to listen to you saying that."

"But it's true, isn't it? H'm. What amazes and disgusts me about this picture is the way in which humans are mingling with these . . . these aliens on terms of apparent equality . . ."

"I suppose you could look at it that way."

"Here, even though we are all Men, we are careful not to be familiar with any but privileged helots. And these Arcadians are *aliens.*"

"Some time," said Johngrimes, "I must make a careful study of your social history. It should be fascinating. Although that is really Peggy's job."

"Peggy?"

"Dr. Lazenby."

"And some time," said Diomedes, "*I* must make enquiries as to your system of nomenclature. I have heard you call this Margaretlazenby by his rank and profession, with the first part of his name missing. And I have heard you call him Peggy."

Johngrimes laughed. "I suppose that it is rather confusing to people who have only one name apiece. *We* have at least two—the surname, or family name . . ."

"But there is only one family. The State."

"On Sparta, perhaps. But let me fin-



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ish, Captain Diomedes. We have the family name, which, with us, comes last, although some human races put it first. Then we have one, if not more, given name. Then we have nicknames. For example—Margaret, one word, Lazenby, one word. Peggy—which for some obscure reason is a corruption of Margaret. Of course, she could also be called Maggie or Meg. Or Peg. In my own case—John Grimes. But that 'John' can be changed to 'Jack' or 'Johnnie' by people who really know me."

"Like Theo for Theopompus . . ." contributed Brasidus.

"Yes. Some of our nicknames are curtailments—like Margie or Margo for Margaret."

"How many names *has* that being got?" exploded Diomedes.

"I've heard her called other things—and called her them myself. But you wouldn't know what a bitch was, would you?"

"Doubtless some exotic beast you've run across on your travels. But, Lieutenant Commander, you keep on using these odd pronouns—*She* and *Her*. Are they confined to Arcadians?"

"You could say that," Grimes seemed to be amused by something. "Now, gentlemen, may I offer you refreshment? The sun's not yet over the yardarm, but a drop of alcohol won't kill us. Or would you rather have coffee?"

"Coffee? What's that?"

"Don't you have it here? Perhaps you would like to try some now."

"If you partake with us," said Diomedes cautiously.

"But of course." Grimes got to his feet, went to his desk, picked up a telephone. "Pantry? Captain here. I'd like my coffee now, please. Large pot, with all the trimmings. Three cups."

He took an oddly shaped wooden . . . instrument? off the desk top, stuffed a hollow bowl at the end of it with what looked like a dried brown weed, put the thin stem in his mouth, applied a flame from a little metal contraption to the open top of the bowl. He inhaled with apparent pleasure, then expelled from between his lips a cloud of fragrant fumes. "Sorry," he said, "do you smoke?" He opened an ornamental box, displaying rows of slim cylinders obviously rolled from the brown weed.

"I think that one strange luxury will be enough for one day, Lieutenant Commander," said Diomedes, to Brasidus' disappointment.

The door to the outside alleyway opened. A spaceman came in, by his uniform not an officer, carrying a large silver tray on which rested a steaming, silver pot, a silver jug and a silver bowl filled with some white powder, and also three cups of gleaming, crested porcelain each standing in its own little plate. But it was not the tray at which Diomedes and Brasidus stared; it was at the bearer.

He was obviously yet another Arcadian.

Brasidus glanced from him to the picture, and back again. He realized that he was wondering what the spaceman would look like stripped of that severe, functional clothing.

"Milk, sir? Sugar?" the rating was asking.

"I don't think that they have them on this planet, Sheila," said Grimes. "There's quite a lot that they don't have."

Chapter 7



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Slowly Diomedes and Brasidus made their way down the ramp from the airlock. Both were silent, and the Sergeant, at least, was being hard put to it to sort and to evaluate the multitude of new impressions that had crowded upon him. The coffee—could it be a habit-forming drug? But it was good. And that burning weed the fumes of which Lieutenant Commander Grimes had inhaled with such enjoyment . . . And the un-Spartan luxury in which Grimes lived—luxury utterly unsuitable for a fighting man . . . and this Interstellar Federation, an officer of whose Navy—although it was called the Survey Service—he claimed to be.

And these oddly disturbing Arcadians (if they were Arcadians)—the doctor Lazenby, the steward Sheila, and one or two more whom the Spartans had glimpsed on their way ashore . . .

They were out of earshot of the ship now, half way between the airlock and the gate, outside which Hector and the other hoplites had stiffened to attention. Diomedes said, "Come to my office, Sergeant. I want to talk things over with you. There's a lot that I don't understand—but much of it strengthens my suspicions."

"Of whom, sir? This Lieutenant Commander Grimes?"

"No. He's just a spaceman, the same as Captain Bill and Captain Jim of the *Venus* and the *Hera*. If his Service prefers to tack a double-barrelled label on to him, that's his worry. Oh, I want to find out where the ship *is* from and what's the reason for its visit, but my main suspicions are much nearer home."

They passed through the gate, opened for them and locked after them by Hector. Old Cleon approached them, was brushed off by Diomedes. They continued their march to the office—although in the case of Diomedes it was more of a waddle.

"In my job," went on the Security Captain, buckling on his pistol belt as he walked, "I'm no respecter of persons. I shouldn't be earning my pay if I were." He gestured skywards. "Flight Admiral Ajax up there, for example. He holds his rank—and his life—only because I do not choose to act yet. When I do . . ." He closed his pudgy fist decisively and suggestively. "You're an ambitious man, Brasidus. And an intelligent one. I've had my eye on you for some time. I have been thinking of asking to have you transferred to Security. And when Diomedes *asks* people hurry to oblige him."

"Thank you, sir."

"With promotion to Lieutenant, of course."

"Thank you, sir."

"Think nothing of it. I need a young assistant for the . . . the leg-work." He smiled, showing all his uneven, discoloured teeth, obviously pleased with the expresssion he had just coined. "The leg-work," he repeated.

The two men entered the Spaceport Security Office, passed through into Diomedes' private room. At the captain's order Brasidus sat down. The chair was hard, comfortless—yet he felt far happier on it than he had felt in the luxury of Lieutenant Commander Grimes' day cabin. Diomedes produced a flagon of beer, two mugs. He poured. "To our . . . partnership," he said.



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"To our partnership, sir."

"Now, *Lieutenant* Brasidus, what I am saying to you is strictly confidential. I need not remind you of the consequences to yourself if you abuse my confidence. To begin with, I played along with this man Grimes. I asked the silly questions that he'd assume that I would ask. But I formed my own conclusions."

"And what were they, sir?"

"Oh, I'm not telling you yet, young Brasidus. I could be wrong—and I want your mind to remain uninfluenced by any theories of mine. But they tie in, they tie in. They tie in with the most heinous crime of all—treason to the State. Now, tell me, who're the most powerful men on Sparta?"

"The most powerful man is the King, sir."

Diomedes' thin eyebrows lifted, arching over his muddy eyes. "Is he? But no matter. And I said 'the most powerful men'."

"The Council, sir."

"H'm. Could be. *Could* be. But . . ."

"What are you driving at, sir?"

"What about the doctors, our precious medical priesthood? Don't they control the birth machines? Don't they decide who among the newly born is to live, and who to die? Don't they conduct the fatherhood tests? Don't they say, in effect, that there shall be so many members of the military caste, so many helots—*and so many doctors?*"

"Yes. That's so, sir. But how could they be traitors?"

"Opportunity, dear boy. Opportunity. Opportunity for a betrayal of the principles upon which our State was founded. Frankly, although I have long harbored suspicions, I did not really think that it was possible until the man Grimes landed here with his ship and his mixed crew. Now I realize the evil spell that can be exerted by those . . . creatures."

"What creatures?" demanded Brasidus as impatiently as he dared.

"The Arcadians? Yes—that's as good a name as any." He refilled the mugs. "Now, I have to make my report and my recommendations to the Council. When Grimes made his first psionic contact with the spaceport authorities, before he re-entered normal Space-Time, he requested permission to land and to take a census, and also to carry out ecological and ethological surveys. Ethology, by the way, is the science of behavior. I learned that much, although I've been making use of its principles for years. Later he confirmed this by normal radio—psionic reception at this end was rather garbled as our telepaths were completely unfamiliar with so many new concepts.

"As you well know, after your many spells of spaceport guard duty, it has always been contrary to Council policy to allow visiting spacemen to mingle with our population. But I shall recommend that in this case an exception be made, arguing that Grimes and his men are quite harmless, also that the Federation—yes, I'm afraid that there *is* one—is obviously powerful and might take offense if its servants were not hospitably received.

"My real reason for the recommendation I shall keep to myself."

"And what is it, sir?"

"When a pot boils, Brasidus, all sorts of scum comes to the top. A few . . . Arcadians running around on Sparta might well bring the pot to the



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boil. And who will get scalded? *That* is the question."

"You don't like the doctors, Captain?"

"That I do not. I am hoping that those whom I suspect of treason will be forced to act—and to act rashly."

"There *is* something suspicious about them—or about some of them." Briefly, but omitting nothing, Brasidus told Diomedes of his encounter with Heraklion in the Creche. "He was hiding something," he concluded. "I am sure of that."

"And you're ideally situated to find out what it was, Brasidus." Diomedes was thoughtful. "This is the way that we shall play it. Officially you are still a Sergeant in the Police Battalion. Your pay will be made up, however, to a Lieutenant's rates out of Security funds. You will be relieved of spaceport guard duties. You will discover, in fact, that your captain will be allowing you considerable free time. Free insofar as *he* is concerned—as far as *I* am concerned it will not be so free. Off duty you will be able to visit your friend Achron at the Creche. I already knew of your friendship with him, as a matter of fact—that was one of the reasons why I was considering having you transferred to my Branch. One of the nurses might have been a better recruit—but their loyalities are so unreliable. On duty you will act as escort to Lieutenant Commander Grimes and his officers.

"And you will report to me everything—and I mean *everything*—you learn."

"And what shall I learn, sir?"

"You'll be surprised. It could be that I shall be, too." He picked up the telephone on his desk, ordered his car brought round to the office. Then he said to Brasidus, "Give Hector his instructions. He can carry on until relieved. Then you can ride with me back to the city."

## Chapter 8

Back in the city, Diomedes had his driver proceed directly to the Police Barracks. There, with no trouble, he obtained an interview with Brasidus' commanding officer. Brasidus, sitting on the hard bench otuside the captain's office, wondered what was being said about him. Then the door opened and he was called in.

He looked at the two men confronting him—the squat, somehow squalid Diomedes, the tall, soldierly Lycurgus. Diomedes looked smugly satisfied, Lycurgus resentful. There could be no doubt as to how things had gone—and, suddenly, Brasidus hoped that he would not regret this change of masters.

"Sergeant—or should I say Lieutenant?" growled Lysurgus, "I think that you already know of your transfer. Officially, however, you are still a sergeant and you are still working for me. Your real orders, however, will come from Captain Diomedes." He paused, then went on, "You are relieved from duty until 0800 hours tomorrow morning, at which time you are to report to the spaceport." He turned to the Security Captain. "He's all yours, Diomedes."

"Thank you, Lycurgus. You may accompany me, Brasidus."

They left the office. Diomedes asked, "And when is your friend Achron on duty again, young man?"

"He has the midnight to 0600 shift for the rest of this week, sir."

"Good. Then I propose that you



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spend the rest of the day at leisure; after all, this was supposed to be your free time, wasn't it? Get some sleep this evening before midnight—you might visit Achron again then. Then, of course, you will report to me at the spaceport tomorrow morning. I have no doubt that I shall be able to persuade the Council to accede to Lieutenant Commander Grimes' requests, so you will be required for escort duties."

"And when I visit Achron, sir? Am I to carry out any investigations?"

"Yes. But cautiously, cautiously. Find out what you can without sticking your neck out. But I must leave you now. I have to report to my lords and masters." His sardonic intonation left no doubt in Brasidus' mind as to who was the real lord and master.

Brasidus went to the mess hall for a late and solitary luncheon of bread, lukewarm stew and beer. Then, conscious of his new (but secret) rank and his new responsibilities he decided to visit the Library. There were books, of course, in the Recreation Hall of the Barracks, but these were mainly works of fiction, including the imaginative thrillers that were his favorite reading. (But none of the writers had imagined monsters as fantastic as these Arcadians—fantastic because of similarities to as well as differences from normal humankind.) He was in uniform still, but that did not matter. However, there was his belt, with its holstered pistols. He went to the Desk Sergeant to turn it in.

"Keep it, Brasidus," he was told. "Captain Lycurgus said that you were on instant call as long as the spaceship's in port."

It made sense—just as the regulation forbidding the carrying of firearms when not on duty made sense; they might be used in a drunken brawl at one of the Clubs. However, Brasidus always felt happier when armed and so did not inquire further. He went out into the street, his iron-tipped sandals ringing on the cobbles. He stood on the sidewalk to watch a troop of armored cavalry pass, the tracks of the chariots striking sparks from the paving, the gay pennons whipping from the slender radio masts, the charioteers in their plumed helmets standing tall and proud in their turrets.

Cavalry in the city . . .

The Council must be apprehensive.

Brasidus continued his walk when the chariots had gone by. He strode confidently up the wide, stone steps to the white-pillared Library entrance, but inside the cool building diffidence assailed him. An elderly man behind a big desk surveyed him disapprovingly, his gaze lingering on the weapons. "Yes, Sergeant?" he demanded coldly.

"I . . . I want to do some reading."

"Unless you've come here to make an arrest, that's obvious. What sort of reading? We do have a thriller section." He made *thriller* sound like a dirty word.

"No, not thrillers. We've plenty of those in our own Recreation Hall. History."

The bushy white eyebrows lifted. "Oh. Historical thrillers."

"No. Not thrillers." Brasidus was finding it hard to keep his temper. "History."

The old man did not get up from



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his seat, but turned and pointed. "Through there, Sergeant. That door. If you want to take a book out you'll have to sign for it and pay a deposit, but there are tables and benches if you want to read on the premises."

"Thank you," said Brasidus.

He went through the door, noted the sign HISTORICAL SECTION above it. He stared at the book-lined walls, not knowing where to begin. He walked to the nearer shelves, just inside the doorway, the clatter of his uniform sandals on the marble floor drawing disapproving glares from the half dozen or so readers seated at the tables. But they were only helots, by the looks of them, and their feelings did not matter.

He scanned the row of titles. A HISTORY OF SPARTA, by Alcamenes . . . That would do to start with. He pulled it from its place on the shelf, carried it to a vacant table, sat down. He adjusted the reading lamp.

Yes, he had been lucky in his random choice. This seemed to be a very comprehensive history—starting, in fact, in prehistorical days. The story it told should not have been new to Brasidus—after all, he had been exposed to a normal education. But he had not paid much attention to his teachers; he had known that he was destined to be a soldier—so, apart from the study of past campaigns, of what value was education to him?

But here it all was. The evolution of a biped from a big-headed quadruped, with forelimbs modified to arms and hands. The slow, slow beginnings of civilization, of organized science. And then, at last, the invention of the Birth Machine by Lacedaemon, the perfection of the technique by which the father's seed could be brought to maturity apart from his body. No longer hampered by the process of budding men went ahead by leaps and bounds. Aristodemus, the first King of Sparta, organized and drilled his army and navy, subjugated the other City States, imposed the name of his capital upon the entire planet—although (even to this day, as Brasidus knew) there were occasional armed revolts.

And there were scientific advancements. The mechanical branch of the priesthood advanced from aeronautics to astronautics and, under Admiral Latterus, a star fleet was launched, its object being the colonization of a relatively nearby planet. But Latterus was ambitious, set up his own kingdom, and with him he had taken the only priests who knew the secret of the interstellar drive. After many generations the people of Latterhaven—as Latterus' colony has been called—revisited Sparta. A trade agreement was drawn up and signed, complying with which the Latterhaveneers sent two ships every year, bringing various manufactured goods in exchange for shipments of the spices that grew only on Sparta . . .

Impatiently Brasidus turned to the index. Interstellar Federation . . . No. Not listed. Interstellar ships, interstellar drive, but no Federation. But that would have been too much to expect. Latterhaven had a history, but its people kept it to themselves. This Admiral Latterus had his ships and, no doubt, one planet had not been enough for him. He had his Birth Machines—and, even though Brasidus was no biologist, he was sure that it would be possible to accelerate production. The natural way—inter-



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course between two beings and, possibly, each one budding—was slow and wasteful. Suppose that *all* the seed were utilized . . . Then how long would it take to build up teeming populations on a dozen worlds?

Terra, for example.

And Arcadia?

No. Not Arcadia.

But *were* the Arcadians human? Could they be the result of a malfunction of the Birth Machine set up on their planet? If this was the case, how could they, with their obvious physical deficiencies, reproduce?

Brasidus looked up Arcadia in the index. It was not, of course, listed.

He put Alcamenes' book back on the shelf, went out to see the old librarian. "Have you," he asked, "anything on the Interstellar Federation? Or on a world called Arcadia?"

"I told you," huffed the ancient man, "that it was fiction you wanted. Science fiction, at that."

"Suppose I told you that there *is* an Insterstellar Federation? Suppose I told you that there are, at present, Arcadians on Sparta?"

"I'd say, young man, that you were quite mad—if it wasn't for your uniform. And it's not that I'm afraid of *that*, or of the guns you wear into my library. It's because that I know—as who doesn't—that a strange, unscheduled ship has made a landing at the spaceport. And you're a Sergeant in the Police Branch of the Army, so you know more about what's going on than we poor scholars." He cackled. "Go on, Sergeant. Tell me more. I am always willing to acquire new knowledge."

"What rumors have you heard?" asked Brasidus. After all, he was a Security Officer now and might as well

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begin acting as if he were the one.

"They say that this ship's a battleship—and, with the Air Navy hanging over the spaceport like a bad smell and the streets full of cavalry it could well be. They say that the President of Latterhaven has demanded our instant surrender. They say, too, that the ship's not from Latterhaven at all, that it's manned by robots with twin turrets on their chests from which they shoot lethal rays . . ."

"They must be functional . . ." mused Brasidus. "I suppose."

"What must be?" demanded the Librarian.

"Those twin turrets. Good day to you."

He clanked out through the wide doorway, down the stone steps.

## Chapter 9

Brasidus walked back to his Barracks, thinking over what he had read and what the Librarian had told him. It all tied in—almost. But how did it tie in with Diomedes' suspicions of the medical priesthood? Perhaps tonight we would be able to find something out.

In the Mess Hall he partook of an early evening meal—and still his active brain was working. The spices exported to Latterhaven were a luxury—so much so that they were used but rarely in Spartan cookery. *And you can say that again,* Brasidus told himself, chewing viciously on his almost flavorless steak. Obviously they were also a luxury on the other planet, otherwise why should the Latterhaveneers find it worthwhile to send two ships every year for the annual shipment? But what *did* the Latterhaveneers bring in return for the spices? Manufactured goods. But *what* manufactured goods?

Brasidus, as a spaceport guard, had watched the Latterhaven ships discharging often enough. He has seen the unmarked, wooden crates sliding down the conveyor belts into the waiting trucks, had vaguely wondered where these same trucks were bound when, escorted by police chariots, they had left the spaceport. He had made inquiries once, of one of the charioteers whom he knew slightly. "We just convoy them into the city," the man has told him. "They're unloaded at that big warehouse—you know the one, not far from the Creche. Andronicus Imports."

And what did Andronicus import?

Diomedes might know.

Finishing his meal, Brasidus wandered into the Recreation Hall. He bought a mug of sweet wine from the steward on duty, sat down to watch television. There was the news first—and there was no mention of the landing of *Seeker III.* Fair enough. The Council had still to decide what to say about it as well as what to do about it. The main coverage was of the minor war in progress between Pharis and Messenia. Peisander, the Messenian general, was something of an innovator. Cleombrotus of Pharis, was conservative, relying upon his hoplites to smash through the Messenian lines—and his casualties, under the heavy fire of the Messenian archers, were heavy. There were those who maintained that the bow should be classed as a firearm and its use forbidden to the ordinary soldiery, those not in the Police Branch. Of course, if the hoplites, with their spears and swords, got loose among the archers there would be slaughter. Against that the archers, lightly armoured, far less



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encumbered, could run much faster. The commentator, hovering above the battlefield, made this same comment, and Brasidus congratulated himself upon his grasp of military principles.

Following the news came a coverage of the Games at Helos. Brasidus watched the wrestling bouts for a while, then got up and left the Hall. After all, the games were no more than a substitute for war—and war, to every Spartan worth his salt, was the only sport for a man. Non-lethal sports were only for helots.

Finding the Duty Orderly, the Sergeant gave instructions to be called at 2330 hours.

He was almost at the Creche when he saw a slight form ahead of him. He quickened his pace, overtook the other pedestrian. As he had thought it would be, it was Achron.

The nurse was pleased to see him. He said, "I rang the Barracks, Brasidus, and they told me that you were on duty all day."

"I was, but I'm off the hook now."

"You were at the spaceport, weren't you? Is it true that this ship is from *Outside*, with a crew of monsters?"

"Just a ship," Brasidus told him.

"But the *monsters?*"

"What monsters?"

"Horribly deformed beings from Outer Space. *Muiants.*"

"Well, Diomedes and myself were entertained on board by the captain, and he's human enough."

"More than you can say for Diomedes," commented Achron spitefully. "I used to like him *once*, but not any more. Not after what he *did.*"

"Whad did he do?"

"I'll tell you sometime. Are you coming into the Creche, Brasidus?"

"Why not?"

"Telemachus will be pleased. He was saying to me what a fine example you are to the average Spartan . . ."

"Back again, Sergeant?" the old man greeted him. "I shall soon think that you would welcome a return to the bad old days of budding."

"Hardly," said Brasidus, trying to visualize the difficulties that would be experienced in the use of weapons when encumbered by undetached offspring.

"And were you out at the spaceport today, Brasidus?"

"Yes."

"What are they *really* like, these monsters?"

"Captain Diomedes bound us all to secrecy."

"A pity. A pity. If you were to tell me what you saw it would never go beyond the walls of this building."

"I'm sorry Telemachus. You'll just have to wait until the news is released by the Council."

"The Council." The old man laughed bitterly. "In *my* day there were men of imagination serving on it. But now . . ." He looked up at the wall clock. "Well, in you go. Phillip is waiting for his relief. He was *most* unpleasant when he discovered that *I* had detained you yesterday."

Brasidus followed his friend to the ward where he was on duty. This time Phillip was in a better mood—and he, too, tried to pump the Sergeant about the day's events at the spaceport. Finally he gave up and left the two friends. As before, Brasidus allowed himself to be led to the sons who might be his own. Yet again he was unable to detect any real resemblance. And then—it was



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what he had been waiting for—all the babies awoke.

He retreated hastily, as any normal man would have done, leaving Achron to cope. But he did not go to the door by which he had entered, but to the further doorway. He waited there for a minute or so, thinking that the doctor Heraklion or one of his colleagues might be attracted by the uproar—but, after all, such noises were common enough in the Creche.

But neither Heraklion nor anybody else appeared in the long, dimly lit corridor, and Brasidus decided to venture further afield. He was barefooted, so could walk silently. He was wearing a civilian tunic, which was advantageous. Should anybody who did not know him see him, his appearance would be less likely to cause alarm than if he was in uniform.

Cautiously he advanced along the corridor. His own was the only movement. If there were any sounds he could not hear them for the bawling behind him. On either side of the corridor there were numbered doors. Storerooms? Laboratories? Cautiously he tried one. It was locked.

He continued his prowl. It was a long corridor, and he did not wish to get too far from the war—yet this was a golden opportunity to find something out. He came to a cross passageway, hesitated. He saw that a chair was standing just inside the left hand passage. Presumably it had just been evacuated—there was a book, open, face down, on the seat, a flagon and a mug beside it. A guard? If so, not a very good one. No doubt he had some pressing reason for deserting his post—but he would never have done so, at no matter what cost to personal dignity, had he been a member of the military caste. A helot, then—or even a doctor. Heraklion? Brasidus did not know what the man's hours of duty were—but they could coincide with or overlap Achron's.

He picked up the book, looked at the title. GALACTIC SPY, by Delmar Brudd. Yet another of those odd double names. He turned to the title page, saw that the novel had been published by the Phoenix Press, Latterton, on the planet of Latterhaven. So this was a sample of the manufactured goods exported by that planet. But why should these books not be put into general circulation. If it were a question of freight, large editions could easily be printed here on Sparta.

He was suddenly aware that a door was opening. He heard someone say, "I must leave you, dear. After all, it is my turn for sentry duty."

A strange voice replied. It was too high pitched, held an odd, throaty quality. Yet it was oddly familiar. What—*who*—did it remind Brasidus of? Even as he slid silently back around the corner—but not before he had replaced the book as he had found it—he had the answer. It sounded like the voice of the Arcadian, Margaret Lazenby. It was certainly not the voice of any native of Sparta.

Still Brasidus was reluctant to retreat. He continued to peer around the corner, ready to jerk back in a split second. "I prefer you to the others, Heraklion," the Arcadian was saying.

"I'm flattered, Sally. But you shouldn't have come to me. It's very dangerous. If Orestes found that I'd deserted my post there'd be all hell let loose. And besides . . ."

"Besides what?"

"Only last night—or, rather, yesterday morning—that revolting young



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pansy Achron had his boyfriend with him in the ward—and this same boyfriend is a police sergeant. A dumb one, luckily. Even so, we have to be careful."

"But why, Heraklion, why? You're priests as well as doctors. You control this planet. It would be easy for you to engineer a rough parity of the numbers of men and women—and then just let Nature take its course."

"You don't understand . . ."

"That's what you're always saying. But you saw to it that we were educated and drew some far-fetched analogy between ourselves and the hetirae of ancient Greece. I know that we're petted and pampered—but only within these walls. We've never seen outside them. Is that how women live on Latterhaven, on Terra, on all the Mancolonized planets?"

"You don't understand, Sally."

"No. Of course not. I'm only a woman. And it's obvious that you don't want me, so I'm getting back to my own quarters. To the *harem.*" This final word, dripping contempt, was strange to Brasidus.

"As you will."

"And the next time *you* come to *me,* I shall be busy."

The door opened properly, but still Brasidus did not withdraw his head. The couple who emerged from the storeroom or whatever it was had their backs to him. The shorter of the pair was dressed in a brief, black tunic woven from some transparent material. His lustrous, auburn hair hung to his smooth, gleaming shoulders—and his rounded buttocks gleamed through the flimsy garment. He walked with a peculiarly provocative swing of the hips. Brasidus stared after him—and so, luckily, did Heraklion. Before the doctor could turn Brasidus withdrew, hurried swiftly and silently back along the corridor. There were no shouts, no pursuit. The only noise came from the ward, where Achron—*and what* was *a pansy?*—still had not pacified his charges.

Conquering his repugnance Brasidus went in. "Can I help?" he asked the nurse.

"Oh, you're still here, Brasidus. I thought you'd have run away *ages* ago. Bring me some bottles from the dispenser, will you? You know how."

Brasidus obeyed. While he was so engaged, Dr. Heraklion strode through the doorway. "Really, Sergeant," he snapped, "I can't have this. This is the second time that you've come blundering in here, disturbing our charges. I shall have to complain to your superior."

"I'm sorry, Doctor."

"That isn't good enough, Sergeant. Leave, please. At once."

Brasidus left. He would gain nothing by staying any longer. And perhaps he should telephone Diomedes to tell the Security Captain what he had learned. But what had he learned? That there was a nest of Arcadian spies already on Sparta? Spies—or infiltrators? Infiltrators—and the doctors working in collusion with them?

And how did that tie in with the visit of *Seeker III,* a vessel with Arcadians in its own crew?

*Very well indeed,* Brasidus told himself. *Very well indeed.*

He rang Diomedes from the first telephone booth he came to, but there was no answer to his call. He rang again from the Barracks, and there was still no answer. He looked at the time, shrugged his shoulders, went to his cubicle and turned in.



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While he was having his breakfast, prior to going out to the spaceport, Captain Lycurgus sent for him. "Sergeant," he said, "I've received a complaint. About you. From Dr. Heraklion, at the Creche. In future, leave his nurses alone in duty hours."

"Very good, sir."

"And one more thing, Brasidus . . ."

"Yes, sir?"

"I shall pass the Doctor's complaint on to Captain Diomedes. I understand that he gives you your real orders these days."

## Chapter 10

Diomedes sent his car round to the Barracks in the morning to pick up Brasidus. It was another fine day, and the drive out to the spaceport was pleasant. The driver was not disposed to talk, which suited Brasidus. He was turning over and over in his mind what he would tell the Security Captain, and was wondering what conclusions Diomedes would draw from the events in the Creche. Meanwhile there was the morning air to enjoy, still crisp, not yet tainted by the pungency from the spicefields on either side of the road.

Above the spaceport the ships of the Air Navy still circled and, as the car neared the final approaches, Brasidus noted that heavy motorized artillery as well as squadrons of armored cavalry had been brought up. Whatever John Grimes had in mind, the Police Branch would be ready for him. But Brasidus did not regret that he had not, as a recruit, been posted to a mechanized unit. A hoplite such as himself was always fully employed, the armored cavalry but rarely, the artillery almost never.

The main gates opened as the car, without slackening speed, approached them. The duty guard saluted smartly—the vehicle rather than himself, Brasidus guessed. There was a spectacular halt in a column of swirling dust outside the Security Office. Diomedes was standing in the doorway. He sneezed, glared at the driver, withdrew hastily into the building. Brasidus waited until the dust had subsided before getting out of the car.

"That Agis!" snarled the captain as he sketchily acknowledged Brasidus' salute, "I'll have him transferred to the infantry!"

"I've seen him do the same when he's driving you, sir."

"Hmph! That's different, young man. Well, he got you here in good time. Just as well, as I've instructions for you."

"And I've a report for you, sir."

"Already, Brasidus? You've wasted no time." He smiled greasily. "As a matter of fact I've already had a call from Captain Lycurgus, passing on a complaint from Dr. Heraklion. What did you learn?"

Brasidus, who possessed a trained memory, told his superior what he had seen and heard. Diomedes listened intently. Then he asked, "And what do *you* think, Brasidus?"

"That Arcadians were already on Sparta before *Seeker* landed, sir."

"Arcadians? Oh, yes. The twin-turreted androids. Did you hear that rumor too? And how do you think they got here?"

"There could have been secret landings, sir. Or they could have been smuggled in aboard *Latterhaven Venus* and *Latterhaven Hera.*"

"And neither of these theories throws Security in a very good light,



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does it? And the smuggling one rather reflects upon the spaceport guards."

"They needn't be smuggled in as adults, sir. Children could be hidden in some of those crates discharged by Latterhaven ships. They could be drugged, too, so that they couldn't make any noise . . ."

"Ingenious, Brasidus. Ingenious. But I've been aboard the *Venus* and the *Hera* often enough—and, believe me, it would be impossible for either ship to carry more than her present complement. Not even children. They're no more than cargo boxes with a handful of cubicles, cells that we should consider inadequate for our criminals, perched on top of them . . ."

"The cargo holds . . .?"

"No. You can't have a man—or a child—living in any confined space without his leaving traces."

"But they didn't just . . . *happen*, sir. The Arcadians, I mean."

"Of course not. They either budded from their fathers or came out of a Birth Machine." Diomedes seemed to find this amusing. "No, they didn't just happen. They were either brought here or came here under their own power. But *why?*"

"Heraklion seemed to *like* the one that he was with last night. It was . . . unnatural."

"And what were *your* feelings towards him? Or *it?*"

Brasidus blushed. He muttered, "As you said yourself, sir, these beings possess a strange, evil power."

"So they do. So they do. That's why we must try to foil any plot in which they're engaged." He looked at his watch. "Meanwhile, my own original plan still stands. The Council has approved my suggestion that *Seeker's* personnel be allowed to leave their ship. Today you will, using my car and driver, escort Lieutenant Commander Grimes and Dr. Lazenby to the city, where an audience with the King and the Council has been arranged for them. You will act as guide as well as escort, and—you are armed—also as guard."

"To protect them, sir?"

"Yes. I suppose so. But mainly to protect the King. How do we know that when they are in his presence they will not pull a weapon of some kind. You will be with them; you will be situated to stop them at once. Of course, there will be plenty of my own men in the Council Chamber, but you would be able to act without delay if you had to."

"I see, sir."

"All right. Now we are to go aboard the ship to tell them that everything has been organized."

A junior officer met them in the airlock, escorted them up to the captain's quarters. Grimes was attired in what was obviously ceremonial uniform—and very hot and uncomfortable it must be, thought Brasidus. Professionally he ran his eye over the spaceman for any evidence of weapons. There was one, in full sight, but not a very dangerous one. It was a sword, its hilt gold-encrusted, in a gold-trimmed sheath at the Lieutenant Commander's left side. More for show than use, was the Sergeant's conclusion.

John Grimes grinned at his two visitors. "I hate this rig," he confided, "but I suppose I have to show the flag. Dr. Lazenby is lucky. Nobody has ever gotten around to designing full dress for women officers."

There was a tap at the door and



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Margaret Lazenby entered. He was dressed as he had been the previous day, although the clothing itself, with its bright braid and buttons, was obviously an outfit that was worn only occasionally. He said pleasantly, "Good morning, Captain Diomedes. Good morning, Sergeant. Are *you* coming with us, Captain?"

"Unfortunately, no. I have urgent business here at the spaceport. But Brasidus will be your personal escort. Also, I have detailed two chariots to convoy you into the city."

"*Chariots?* Oh, you mean those light tanks that we've been watching from the control room."

"*Tanks?*" repeated Diomedes curiously. "A tank is something you keep fluids in."

"There are tanks *and* tanks. Where we come from, a tank can be an armored vehicle with caterpillar tracks."

"And what does 'caterpillar' mean?"

Grimes said, "Over the generations new words come into the language and old words drop out. Obviously there are no caterpillars on Sparta, and so the term in meaningless. However, Captain Diomedes, you are welcome to make use of our microfilm library; I would suggest the Encyclopedia Galactica."

"Thank you, Lieutenant Commander." Diomedes looked at his watch. "But may I suggest that you and Dr. Lazenby proceed now to your audience?"

"And will the rest of my crew be allowed ashore?"

"That depends largely upon the impression that you make upon the King and his Council."

"Where's my fore-and-aft hat?" muttered Grimes. He got up, went through one of the curtained doorways. He emerged wearing an odd, gold-braided, black cloth helmet. He said, "Lead on, MacDuff."

"It should be 'lay on, MacDuff,' Margaret Lazenby told him.

"I know, I know."

"And who is MacDuff?" asked Diomedes.

"He's dead. He was the Thane of Cawdor."

"And where is Cawdor?"

Grimes sighed.

Brasidus, although he could not say why he did so, enjoyed the ride to the city. He, Grimes and Margaret Lazenby were in the back seat of the car, with the Arcadian (it was as good a label as any) sitting between the two humans. He was stirred by the close proximity of this strange being, almost uncomfortably so. When Margaret Lazenby leaned across him to look at a medusa tree swarming with harpies he realized that those peculiar fleshy mounds, which even the severe uniform could not hide, were deliciously soft. So much for the built-in weapon theory. "What fantastic birds!" exclaimed the Arcadian.

"They are harpies," said Brasidus.

"Those round bodies do look like human heads, don't they? They could be straight out of Greek mythology."

"So you have already made a study of our legends?" asked Brasidus, interested.

"Of course." Margaret Lazenby smiled. (His lips against the white teeth were very red. Could it be natural?) "But they aren't just *your* legends. They belong to all Mankind."



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"I suppose they do. Admiral Latterus must have carried well-stocked libraries aboard his ships."

"Admiral Latterus?" asked Margaret Lazenby curiously.

"The founder of Latterhaven. I am surprised that you have not heard of him. He was sent from Sparta to establish the colony, but he made himself King of the new world and never returned."

"What a beautiful history . . ." murmured the Arcadian. "Carefully tailored to fit the facts. Tell me, Brasidus, did you ever hear of the Third Expansion, or of Captain John Latter, Master of the early time-jammer *Utah?* Come to that, did you ever hear of the First Expansion?"

"You talk in riddles, Margaret Lazenby."

"And you and your world are riddles that must be solved, Brasidus."

"Careful, Peggy," warned John Grimes.

The Arcadian turned to address his captain—and, as he did so, Brasidus was acutely conscious of the softness and resilience of the rump under the uniform kilt. "They'll have to be told the truth some time, John—and I'm sure that Brasidus will forgive me for using him as the guinea pig for the first experiment. But I am a little drunk, I guess. All this glorious fresh air after weeks of the canned variety. And look at those houses! With architecture like that there should be *real* chariots escorting us, not these hunks of animated ironmongery. Still, apart from his sidearms, Brasidus is dressed properly."

"The ordinary hoplites," said Brasidus with some pride, "those belonging to the subject City States, are armed only with swords and spears."

"They didn't have wristwatches in ancient Sparta," Grimes pointed out.

"Oh, be practical, John. He could hardly wear an hourglass or a sundial on his arm, could he?"

"It's . . . phony," grumbled Grimes.

"It should be as phony as all hell, but it's not," Margaret Lazenby told him. "I wish I'd know just how things are here, though. I'd have swotted up on Hellenic history before we came here . . . What are those animals Brasidus? They look almost like a sort of hairless wolf."

"They are the scavengers. They keep the streets of the city clean. There is a larger variety, wild, out on the hills and plains. *They* are the wolves."

"But that one, there. Look! It's Siamese twins. It seems to be in pain. Why doesn't somebody *do* something about it?"

"But why? It's only budding. Don't *you* reproduce like us—or like we used to, before Lacedaemon invented the Birth Machine?" He paused. "But I suppose you have Birth Machines too."

"We do," said Grimes—and Margaret Lazenby reddened. It was obviously a private joke of some kind.

"The glory that was Greece, the grandeur that was Rome . . ." murmured the Arcadian after a long pause. "But this isn't—forgive me, Brasidus, quite as glorious as it should be. There's a certain . . . untidiness in your streets. And this absence of women seems . . . odd. As I recall it, the average Greek housewife was nothing much to write home about, but the hetirae must have been ornamental."



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"Did they have hetirae in Sparta?" asked Grimes. "I thought that it was only in Athens."

*We do have hetirae in Sparta,* Brasidus thought but did not say, recalling what he had seen and heard in the Creche. Sally (another queer name!) had admitted to being one. But what were hetirae, anyhow?

"They had women," said Margaret Lazenby. "And some of them must have been reasonably good looking, even by our standards. But Sparta was more under masculine domination than the other Greek states."

"Is that the palace ahead, Brasidus?" asked Grimes.

"It is, sir."

"Then be careful, Peggy. Watch your step—and your tongue."

"Ay, ay, Cap'n."

"And I suppose that you, Brasidus, will report everything that you've heard to Captain Diomedes?"

"Of course, sir."

"And so he should," Margaret Lazenby said. "When it gets around these pseudo-Spartans might realize all that they are missing."

"And is the fact that they're missing it grounds for commiseration or congratulation?" asked Grimes quietly.

"Shut up!" snapped his officer mutinously.

## Chapter 11

It was not the first time that Brasidus had been inside the Palace—but, as always, he was awed (although he tried not to show it in front of the foreigners) by the long, colonnaded, high-ceilinged halls, each with its groups of heroic statuary, each with its vivid murals depicting scenes of warfare and the chase. He marched along beside his charges (who, he was pleased to note, had fallen into step), taking pride in the rhythmic, martial clank of the files of hoplites on either side of them, the heralds, long, brazen trumpets already upraised, ahead of them. Past the ranks of Royal Guards—stiff and immobile at attention, tiers of bright-headed spears in rigid alignment—they progressed. He realized, with disapproval, that John Grimes and Margaret Lazenby were talking in low voices.

"More anachronisms for you, Peggy. Those guards. Spears in hand—and projectile pistols at the belt..."

"And look at those murals, John. Pig-sticking—those animals aren't unlike boars—on motorcycles. But these people do have good painters and sculptors."

"I prefer my statues a little less aggressively masculine. In fact, I prefer them non-masculine."

"You would. I find them a pleasant change from the simpering nymphs that are supposed to be decorative on most planets."

"You would . . ."

Brasidus turned his head. "Quiet, please, sirs. We are approaching the Throne."

There was a sharp command from the officer in charge of the escort. The party crashed to a halt. The heralds put the mouthpieces of their instruments to their lips, sounded a long, discordant blast, then another. From a wide, pillard portal strode a glittering officer. "Who comes?" he demanded.

In unison the heralds chanted, "John Grimes, Master of the star ship *Seeker.* Margaret Lazenby, one of his officers."



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"Enter, John Grimes. Enter, Margaret Lazenby."

Again a command from the leader of the escort, and with a jangle of accoutrements the march resumed. although at a slower pace. Through the doorway they passed, halted again. There was another prolonged blast from the heralds' trumpets, a crash of grounded spear butts.

There was the King, resplendent in golden armor (which made the iron crown somehow incongruous), bearded (the only man on Sparta to be so adorned), seated erect on his high, black throne. There, ranged behind him on marble benches, was the Council—the Doctors in their scarlet robes, the Engineers in purple, the Philosophers in black, the Generals in brown and the Admirals in blue. There was the small group of high-ranking helots—Agronomists robed in green, Industrialists in grey. All of them stared curiously at the men from the ship, from whom the guards had fallen away. But, Brasidus noted, there was more than curiosity on the faces of the scarlet-robed Doctors as they regarded Margaret Lazenby. There was recognition, puzzlement and . . . guilt?

Grimes, at heel-clicking attention, saluted smartly.

"You may advance, Lieutenant Commander," said the King.

Grimes did so, once again drawing himself to attention when within two paces from the Throne.

"You may relax, John Grimes. At ease." There was a long pause, then, "We have been told that you come from another world—another world, that is, beyond our polity of Sparta and Latterhaven. We have been told that you represent a government calling itself the Interstellar Federation. Assuming that there is such an entity—what is your business on Sparta?"

"Your Majesty, my mission is to conduct a census of the Man-colonized planets in this sector of Space."

"The members of our Council concerned with such matters will be able to give you all the information you need. But we are told that you and your officer wish to set foot on this world—a privilege never accorded to the crews of Latterhaven ships. May we inquire as to your motives?"

"Your Majesty, in addition to the census we are conducting a survey."

"A survey, Lieutenant Commander?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. There are worlds, such as yours, about which little is known. There are worlds—and yours is one of them—about which much more should be known."

"And this Federation of yours . . ." Brasidus, watching the King's face, could see that he had not been surprised by any of Grimes's answers, that he accepted the existence of worlds other than Sparta and Latterhaven without demur, that even the mention of this fantastic Federation had been no cause for amazement. "It has considerable military strength?"

"Considerable strength, Your Majesty. My ship, for example, is but a small and unimportant unit of our fleet."

"Indeed? And your whereabouts are known?"

"The movements of all vessels are plotted by Master Control."

"And so . . . And so, supposing that some unfortunate accident were to happen to your ship and your crew on Sparta, we might, just possibly, expect a visit from one or more of your big battleships?"



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"That is so, Your Majesty."

"And we could deal with them, Sire!" interpolated a portly, blue-robed Council Member.

The King swiveled around in his throne. "Could we, Admiral Phileus? Could we? We wish that we possessed your assurance. But we do not. It does not matter how and by whom the planets of this Federation were colonized—what does matter is that they own spaceships, which we do not, and even space warships, which even Latterhaven does not. We, a mere monarch, hesitate to advise you upon naval tactics, but we remind you that a spaceship can hang in orbit, clear of the atmosphere—and therefore beyond reach of your airships—and, at the same time, release its shower of bombs upon our cities. Consider it, Phileus." He turned back to Grimes. "So, Lieutenant Commander, you seek permission for you and your men to range unhindered over the surface of our world?"

"I do, Your Majesty."

"Some of our ways and customs may be strange to you. You will not interfere. And you will impart new knowledge only to those best qualified to be its recipients."

"That is understood, Your majesty."

"Sire!" This time it was one of the Doctors. "I respectfully submit that permission to leave this outworld ship be extended only to *human* crew members."

"And what is your reason, Doctor? Let Margaret Lazenby advance so that we may inspect him."

The Arcadian walked slowly towards the King. Looking at hs face, Brasidus could see that the being had lost some of his cockiness. But there was a certain defiance there still. Should this attitude result in punishment ordered by the King, thought Brasidus, there would be a large measure of injustice involved. The major portion of the blame would rest with Grimes who, after all, had so obviously failed to maintain proper disciplinary standards aboard his ship.

Cresphontes, King of All Sparta, looked long and curiously at the alien spaceman. He said at last, "They tell us that you are an Arcadian."

"That is so, Your Majesty."

"And you are a member of a spacefaring race."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Turn around, please. Slowly."

Margaret Lazenby obeyed, his face flushing.

"So . . ." mused the King. "So . . ." He swiveled in his throne so that he faced the Council. "You have all seen. You have all seen that this Arcadian is smaller than a true man, is more slightly built. Do you think that he would be a match for one of our warriors, or even for a helot? A thousand of these creatures, armed, might be a menace. But . . ." He turned to address Grimes. "How many of them are there in your crew, Lieutenant Commander?"

"A dozen, Your Majesty."

"A mere dozen of these malformed weaklings, without arms . . . No, there can be no danger. Obviously, since they are members of *Seeker's* crew, they can co-exist harmoniously with men. So, we repeat, there is no danger."

"Sire!" It was the Doctor who had raised the objection. "You do not know these beings. You do not know how treacherous they can be . . ."

"And do you, Dr. Pausanias? And

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 113)



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# The COURT of KUBLAI KHAN

by DAVID V. REED

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*The stately pleasure-dome in Xanadu became more than mere imagery to Eric Boland when he found a spear pushed against a chest. He enjoyed reading the poem—but he had never imagined that he would come to live in it . . .*

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MAYBE you'll understand this a little better if somewhere in your life something apart from all natural experience has happened to you, something apart from reality, the way we usually speak of reality. I don't know how to make this more clear. You either feel it right away or you don't, and I'm not the first one who's said this—this story is second hand.

The first I heard of it was when Professor Marshall—he's the famous Marshall who advises Hollywood on Shakespeare—wrote me a short letter. He said my closest friend, Eric Boland, was thinking of resigning from the faculty of the college, and he added that Eric might be kicked off before he got around to it. So I took the next train to Ithaca.

All the way up from New York I kept thinking about Marshall's mysterious hinting at irregularities in the way Eric had been conducting himself, in classes and outside. What Marshall meant was class: Eric had one class there. It was listed in the University catalogue as Romantic Poetry, and how anyone could get into trouble teaching something like that was beyond me.

Certainly, I thought about the town girls. I had known some of them myself. But I knew Eric had had no time for that. He was one of those brilliant students who wind up after graduation on a thousand bucks a year; they call them teaching fellows. If the name Eric Boland still sounds familiar to you and it should because it was only three years ago that you used to read about him, you remember Cornell's blond giant, the Boland who played right end and made half a dozen of the All-American teams. He had passed up professional ball and bond selling and donned, as he cheerfully put it, the hairy shirt of a scholar. It meant one class that met an hour a day, three days a week, but Eric usually put in sixty other hours a week in the library, doing the dirty work in research for the senior members of his department. The rest of the time he could spend trying to borrow money.

Professor Marshall was at the Student Union when I found him, playing ping-pong for a nickel a game. He hadn't changed at all in the years since I had been graduated; the same round, smiling face, tanned every Spring from fishing in an open boat, the glasses dangling on a ribbon, the heavy gold watch chain with an enormous Phi Beta Kappa key laid out over his capacious vest. He gave me a firm handshake, put a nickel down on the table, and put on his coat. We started walking downhill along College Avenue toward the Dutch Kitchen.

"Well, I'm glad you came," he said. "Someone had to talk to him before it was too late, and he wouldn't listen to me. I shouldn't wonder if the town newspapers caught hold of it, and went crazy."

"I wish they had," I said. "Maybe I'd know what's up."

"Oh. You haven't seen him?"

"Mrs. Johnson said he wouldn't be back from the library until four. I thought I'd see you and find out what this is all about."

Marshall stopped walking, and he hesitated a moment before he said, "I'm sorry, Peter. I don't think I ought to be the one to tell you. This whole affair is so . . ." the old, quizzical smile lingered a moment, ". . . so strange. Really it is. Let's



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go see him, shall we? He should be back by now."

We went back up the hill and turned in at Linden Street. There were girls riding down on English bicycles, and their laughter drifted back to us, and after they were gone—as if it had waited for them to go—the clock in the library tower struck four, and the sound of the chimes floated down into the valleys that fell away from the campus. I felt the sweet, thrusting pain of nostalgia then, walking down this same street, seeing the houses I had known, seeing the same old elm moving in the wind. It seemed suddenly that I had but to breathe deeply and the years that had gone were recaptured.

Mrs. Johnson was sweeping the porch when we got there. Eric—she called him Professor Boland—had returned, she said, and he was upstairs, and she had given him my note. We went up and saw that his door was open, but when we knocked there was no answer, and when we went in he wasn't there. I went downstairs and asked Mrs. Johnson again.

"He's upstairs," she said. "I passed by his open door less than five minutes ago, and I've been sweeping the halls and the porch since then. He didn't go out."

She came back up with me to the empty apartment, then, deciding he had probably gone into someone else's room. She tried them all, but he wasn't to be found. I could see the bewilderment growing on her face as she returned to Eric's place, walking through the sitting room, study, and bedroom, even opening one of the closets, as if Eric was hiding.

"It isn't so," she said. "I know he was here."

I laughed and said Eric had undoubtedly sneaked past her and we'd wait. But she shook her head and tried the other closets. There was something in the way she went about this that made me feel peculiar, and when I looked at Marshall I wondered if I had the same expression on my face. When Mrs. Johnson went out, Marshall held out a book he had taken from one of the shelves in the study. There was a long, sealed manila envelope in it.

Across the face of the envelope, Eric's careless scrawl had written my name and address together with this notation: *To be forwarded in the event of my disappearance.*

I put it down on the table. "He's trying to kid us," I said.

Mrs. Johnson was at the door again. "My little boy's been playing outside for half an hour," she said. "He saw Professor Boland come in, but he didn't see him go out." She kept looking from me to Marshall as if we were keeping something from her.

"Thank you," I said, and I closed the door

We sat in the living room for more than an hour after that, smoking and talking haphazardly about the college and the reservoir conduit I was working on near Peekskill, and sometimes there were long intervals between answers. Once I looked out of a window and Mrs. Johnson was on the porch stairs, looking down the street. Twilight was beginning to settle and the smell of Spring was strong and fresh, and when I turned back to where Marshall was sitting, with the envelope near him, it had become unreal. I turned on a light, then I picked up the envelope and opened it. It was filled with a score of thin sheets, com-



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pletely written over. I sat down opposite Marshall and passed him each sheet as I finished.

The letter is most of this story:

Let me begin at the beginning, and possibly, in a sense, a bit before that, because there seem to have been antecedent facts connected with what has happened to me. Unless you know them, I am afraid this will be even less intelligible than the facts themselves warrant.

I've been working like a demon these past few months. Dr. Hoag plans to publish the second volume of his trilogy on the Lake poets this fall, and this one is the Coleridge volume. As usual, I've done most of the work, but I haven't given a damn because it had long ago become a labor of love for me. Sometimes I'd be up all night reading every lousy syllable ever written about Coleridge, and go to class next day to lecture on him.

And little by little, the man got me. Does this sound as incomprehensible as I have sometimes thought it might? I still think of you as the hard-headed engineer, you see. At any rate, you must try to understand. I don't know how to express the strange sympathy and kinship I felt for a man dead more than a century, but it was there. This queer, contradictory Coleridge and the sadness and misery that pursued him through his lifetime captured my imagination completely. Probably that was the most important factor in what happened.

You know the sort of thing he wrote, things like *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,* mystical and wildly imaginative. The scholars have it that he was an opium addict, having taken to it after one of his projects failed, and much of his work was supposedly written while he was under the influence of opium. Of all his works, none seems to fit the diagnosis better than his poem *Kublai Khan,* which has always been my favorite.

Every time I read it, and that was often enough, I'd begin to understand why his biographers constantly refer to him as "poor Coleridge." It has less meaning than it has magnificent imagery, and wild and mournful language. Coleridge himself spoke of it as "a vision in a dream."

In Xanadu did Kublai Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.

That's the way it begins. It goes on for some sixty lines, mentioning various places, "a damsel with a dulcimer," and ends abruptly. Coleridge accompanied this poem with a note, saying he had fallen asleep and dreamt it, after taking an anodyne because of illness. He wrote:

"The Author continued in a profound slumber, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence that he composed no less than three hundred lines, if that indeed can be called composition in which the images rose up as *things.*"

When he awoke, he eagerly began putting those lines on paper, but he was interrupted. He tried to return to it again, but the rest of the poem had gone from his memory; it was completely forgotten. Had he been able to finish it, it might have been one



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of the greatest poems in our literature. Coleridge would say of it, and of his plan of finishing it, "I shall sing sweeter tomorrow." It never came.

Three weeks ago, late on a Friday afternoon, I was working in the stacks in the library cellar. I hadn't had much sleep the night before. The stacks were cool and gloomy and quiet, and my books lay on a desk under a tiny reading lamp. I remember feeling tired and leaning back in my chair, and idly fingering through a little red volume with the *Kublai Khan* poem in it. Possibly I closed my eyes and began reading it from memory...

For all the odd clothes we wore, obviously this was Coleridge who walked beside me. I had seen his picture so often before; the black, melancholy eyes, the long, well-shaped nose and the rather full lips—a handsome but rather delicately fashioned man. We were walking along a paved pathway that was elevated a foot above the grassy lawns on either side, and we were talking about something. The transition had been immediate and without sensation. I have no recollection of the conversation, nor did I seem to know what it was about in that first moment of consciousness, but it seemed evident we had been talking for some time.

A moment later there was a tremendous shouting. A score of men were running toward us. They were no more than five feet tall, a group of incredibly fierce and bewildered men, wearing short gowns and shining breastplates and helmets like huge soup tureens, their legs bound in cloth puttees. They waddled on their thick-soled shoes, long hair streaming behind them, clanking spears three times their size against their armor, and yelling in some nonsensical jargon which I understood perfectly.

The confusion was terrific. First they grabbed Coleridge and hustled him off the path a few yards away. Then several of them gingerly took hold of me—I suppose my tweed suit dismayed them a bit—and pulled me in an opposite direction. Then the two groups rushed back to each other and began shouting across the raised pathway.

The trouble was that they were speaking two different languages, and the groups had gotten mixed. One of them yelled, "You, Pai-Lo, will pay for this dereliction with your head!" But Pai-Lo, whichever one he was, cried out, "I swear they were together but an instant!" A third, evidently unable to understand Pai-Lo, kept demanding an explanation in a language which Pai-Lo didn't speak.

But since I knew I could speak both languages, I almost decided to settle matters, but I really didn't give a damn. The whole thing was thoroughly enjoyable. Not only were there elaborate costumes and striking scenery, for I had distinctly made out distant pink structures like oriental castles, but Coleridge was waiting to carry on a conversation.

I edged around the quarreling dark little men and started toward him. Then, suddenly, I knew who Pai-Lo was, because he had jumped up on the pathway, brandishing his spear and invoking several local dieties to witness his innocence. He would not, he screamed, lose his only head because of a Saracen's apparition. He leaped off the pathway and came charging straight for me, his spear in front



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of him. By the Saracen's apparition, apparently, he meant me.

So I ran. The spear, gleaming in the sunlight, followed, with Pai-Lo fifteen feet behind the spear and the rest of the gang after him.

There was a huge tree about a hundred yards away. It looked like a good place to be in. I got to the tree rather quickly, grabbed the lowest branch and tried to swing up. The branch groaned, emitted a loud report and came off in my hands. It cost me the five seconds I had put between myself and that screaming horde, and I just about managed to duck around the tree trunk when the spear came sailing by. Pai-Lo followed in the course of time, and I whacked him across the chest with the stout end of the branch. A bell clanged and Pai-Lo sat down abruptly.

Then his friends started arriving. From what I could gather quickly from the two languages, I was inclined to think they were madder at him than at me, but since I wasn't sure, I rang up a few more fares. After a few minutes, it stopped being funny.

But that's the hell of dreams. They begin where they like and end the same way. Either one is sitting up in bed, or there is another scene, particularly if the last one has been unpleasant. And you can't exactly say that getting cracked over the head with a heavy spear is pleasant. It ended that way.

## Chapter II

So now, sitting up, there was a pillow under my head. I was lying on a couch that was covered with a metallic black-red cloth. A pale green marble floor stretched away toward walls covered with tapestries, and one end of the room was open, leading to a balcony. There were arches before the balcony, and through them streamed warm shafts of sunlight. I could hear voices outside, growing and then diminishing in volume, as if people were passing by the balcony.

Before I could get up to explore the possibilities of the place, two of them entered through a door, and they were lovely. One of the girls wore a short lavender tunic, the other wore a flowered red one, tightly bound around an excellent figure in a way that displayed her character as charming, simple, and without secrets. Both were dark-haired and rather dark-complexioned, a sort of rose and olive that looked incredibly healthy and attractive.

They approached me demurely, bowed, and put down a small silver tray. The tray held a large goblet with an amber fulid in it, and beside it was a fruit the size of an apple, dull red and smooth as a peach. The girl in lavender was carrying clothes and sandals and she put them on the floor near the tray.

They retreated a few feet, bowed again, and the one in flowers said, "When the visitor is refreshed and

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clothed, Vacameth now awaits him."

This Vacameth must be quite a girl, if these two were only the hired help. What she wanted with me was also pleasant conjecture. I said, "And you two visions just work here?"

The one in flowers said, "We are of Timochain, the eighth kingdom of the province of Persia, and we were born into servitude."

"Ah, still the Orient?" I said. I remembered Coleridge then, just for a moment. I wondered how he was doing. There were two girls here, maybe he would fit in again. Vacameth could wait. "Well, don't rush me, girls. Sit down where I can look at you."

They sat down on a cushion near one of the walls. I picked up the fruit and ate it. It tasted like a huge strawberry. The amber liquid turned out to be a cool, spiced wine, and as I lay back on the couch and sipped it, I decided I was the least bit partial to the one in lavender. She seemed a trifle shy, which I like in girls, and she had a damn provocative smile. I tried to make the other one disappear, but it didn't work.

When I finished eating, they came back and held up the clothes they had brought, a white robe and a pair of sandals. I took the robe dubiously wondering what I was supposed to wear underneath. I asked them, and they said that I would wear nothing underneath and they would now help me dress.

The hell with that. I rolled up my trousers until they couldn't be seen under the robe and tied a wide, black leathern belt around my middle. The girls didn't seem to understand. I was getting confused myself. "I'll probably hate myself for this later," I told them. I took off my shoes and put on the sandals lined with white fur. My big feet looked ridiculous. Maybe I should have taken off my socks.

"Okay," I said, and took them by the hand. The girls from Timochain didn't bat an eye. We began to walk right out.

Well, up to that moment when we actually started walking, this room had been the only one that existed for me. The others, in what was obviously an elaborate structure, should have remained vaguely suggestive, like stage scenery. But we walked out through an archway, passing through rooms that kept getting larger all the time, all of them filled with magnificent furniture and hangings and pottery and sculpture and rugs it would have taken hundreds of hides to make, and tapestries large enough for a four-master's mainsail.

Then we came into a corridor that was jammed with people, all on the move. There were scores of them, of different colors and races, dressed in a bewildering variety of styles, and the whole place humming with their talk, and there wasn't a language there that I didn't understand. There were Turks, Abyssinians, Tartars, Persians, Mongols, Saracens, Arabs, Brumese, talking about horses, wines, lands, travels, women, commerce—every damned thing and I understood it all. It made me feel the least bit queer somehow.

We turned at a branch in the corridor and stopped before a huge black door studded with copper decorations. One of the girls opened the door and motioned me to enter, but showed no sign of coming along.

"And is this the brush-off?" I said.

They both bowed and backed away,



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and there was nothing for me to do but play the game. I went through the door and found myself in a room that seemed ceilingless. Before a huge, circular window sat an aged man dressed in a white robe, with an enormous crest of silver thread across his chest. He looked toward me, and for some reason, though I heard nothing, I knew that the door through which I had come had closed behind me.

I tried to tell myself, as I approached and saw him more clearly, that I had known what he would be like. His skin shone like ancient gold in the sunlight and his eyes were bright with the luster of age. He would be the classical wise old man, polite, philosophical, full of wonderful talk.

"I am Vacameth the Saracen," he said. "Be welcome to the court of Kublai Khan."

Vacameth? I suppose I couldn't help smiling, after what I had been thinking. But he was the Saracen, and possibly . . . "The Saracen whose apparition I am?" I said.

"Hardly an apparition," he said, with a faint smile, "though you are doubtless referring to me. I am an astrologer in the service of the Great Khan, and I am from this city of Kanbalu, which is in the province of Cathay."

He seemed to be waiting for me to identify myself, but I said, "Then Coleridge is still part of this?" He nodded. "Well, then," I told him, "I am Eric Boland, from the city of Ithaca, where, at the risk of breaking this up, I'm asleep in the library stacks, and enjoying it."

Vacameth's face clouded momentarily, and then he started to rise, and my eyes never left his robe as he slowly stood up, a tall, majestic old man. There was something distinctly . . . terrifying . . . in the clarity with which I heard that faint rustle of silk as his robe stirred. It was a little sound, lying thinly over the complex pattern of other sounds that sifted through the open windows, and suddenly, as if they had lain dormant, waiting to overwhelm me, I remembered everything I had heard and all the things I had seen. So many things, beyond my knowledge or experience, beyond mental synthesis; the sights, colors, tastes, with nothing left out, nothing fading, complete to minute details . . .

A dream, hellish and potent, nevertheless a dream and nothing more. But, irrevelantly enough, in my mouth I felt one of the seeds from the strange fruit I had eaten. No, I thought—it's a seed from the raspberries I had for lunch. I probed for the seed where it had lodged in my teeth and took it out. It was a strange tiny green thing, oval-shaped and glistening. I dug my nail into it and cut it in two. A tiny droplet of moisture oozed from it. When I opened my hand it fell to the floor. I felt that I couldn't take my eyes away from it.

"Tell me," I heard Vacameth's voice, "have you ever known a moment so agonized that it seemed to last an hour, or a week so happy that it sped by like a day? That moment *was* an hour; that week *was* merely a day. And you have known people for whom time stopped. A loved one dies, and perhaps the mourner refuses to go any farther into time. Time has ceased to exist. All their actions, their beliefs, their knowledge is devoted to that belief. They remain in that time



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when the loved one was still alive.

"How else do you measure time? By your hourglass, your sun-dial, your calendar? So man measures space also, but is an infinity a matter of so many thumb-rules or mile posts? Space is something quite apart from our human measurements. So, too, is time. Time is not a matter of moments, hours, days, years, though we may choose to call it so. Time exists in itself for every man. One man has lived a full life in a score of years, another knows that in four times that number he has not yet begun to live. Time is in the mind . . ."

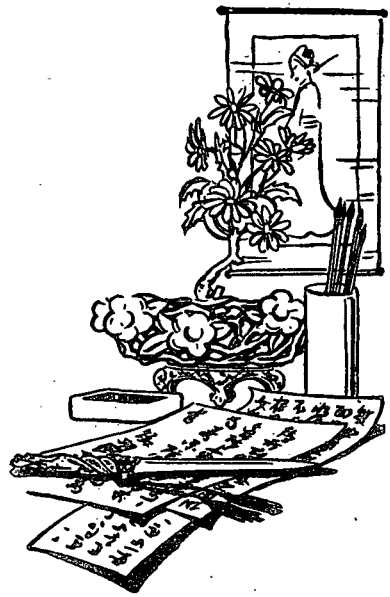
His voice had quieted me and his words had driven the sudden numbing fear from my brain, and all at once I felt reassured. "Then all this does exist only in my mind?" I said.

"It exists in reality," Vacameth said, "because it once existed in time. Nothing exists which does not have duration, if only for an instant. But when duration ends, must existence likewise end?"

"But can your Kanbalu possibly exist simultaneously with the city of my day which I know as Peking?" I asked him.

"You have wandered through open fields which were empty to your perception," said Vacameth. "But what of the air? It was a physical substance, occupying space. You walked through it, gently displacing it, actually unconscious of its existence. There are, among us, savage peoples who have no knowledge of the existence of air. Does it thereby cease to exist? Without it they would perish.

"But for us, where is our food without yesterday's sowing? Where are our houses without yesterday's building? The physical existence of the



past is a reality, whether you perceive it or not. Without it we would perish."

"If what you say is true," I said, "there should be a Peking for every day of its existence."

"For every thousandth part of an instant, according to our concepts. They exist together in continuous time, the only real time."

I just couldn't get it. I would think I was beginning to understand what he was saying and find myself only more confused. "What are you talking about?" I asked him, and I was surprised at the annoyance I heard in my voice. "You're not explaining anything. You're just giving me a lot of analogies that don't hold—"

I was interrupted at that moment by the ringing out of dozens of deep-toned bells, coming from everywhere, floating in through the halls and the windows and filling the room with their melody. I closed my eyes and



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the sound flooded my consciousness, and I knew that I was back in that dark, quiet library cellar and the tower clock was counting the hour and awakening me, and then the bells had stopped . . .

"Come," said Vacameth, taking my arm. "It is the summons to the palace of Kublai." He led me to the door. "There is so much we have to talk about," he said, quietly. "You will want to know how you came here, and I must yet find out why. We are gropers after truth here, you see. But you are correct in distrusting my analogies. So find all the fallacies of my words, and list all my crimes against logic. When you are done, bring them to me—*and then deny that you are here!*"

## Chapter III

I don't suppose I can put into words what I felt that first moment when I saw the sky. Everything that had gone before, turbulent fear and wonder, the torturing struggle to insinuate some vestige of reason into what had happened, became obscured and unimportant. It had become impossible to doubt.

Vacameth and I had emerged from a great building, coming out into what seemed to be an immense garden. The earth was like a lawn, carelessly sprinkled with an abundance of flowers, and broad shade trees were everywhere, and over all this hung the afternoon, sky, a cool, flawless blue infinity. This was the China sky, and this the China of medieval Asia. Somewhere east were the deserts of Persia and north rose unknown Siberia. Tibet, Burma, Ceylon, black Zanzibar, blazing India, cannibal Sumatra, all this vast ancient world of mystery and glory had become resurrected from the bleak tomb of time . . .

"What year is this?" I asked Vacameth, presently.

"In the Christian reckoning, 1271."

We walked for a mile along a broad, paved pathway that rose some three feet over the adjoining field. I remembered that I had seen—the thought was an even greater incongruity—a man to whom both Vacameth and I had referred as Coleridge on such a pathway. When I asked him about it, Vacameth refused my question,

telling me instead of the purpose of the path, which was to allow rain to settle on the fields without muddying the roads.

Vacameth spoke of other things. The two walls far behind us were the outer boundaries of Kanbalu, the battlements of the third wall that was before us, gleaming white against the green earth, enclosed an area four miles square. We entered by one of the two small south gates that flanked the Emperor's gate. This incredible palace filled the entire area. Its sides were ornamented with stone dragons, gilt warriors, birds, animals and panoramic scenes of battle, until they



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were lost in distance, and its towers were blazing with color. It had taken my breath away. I was half dizzy trying to get it all in, but the towers, as I looked at them, suddenly made me laugh.

"You are beginning to feel better?" Vacameth asked me.

"Uh-huh," I grinned at him. "I just remembered where I've seen part of this palace. It won't mean anything to you, but I'm thinking of a palace on Hollywood Boulevard where they show double features."

For a change, Vacameth didn't understand me, which was all right with me. I had come out of the stupor I had been in. The splendor and magnificence around me were too much to take all at once; I was glad to give up thinking about it, as I had felt an immeasurable relief when I had known, moments before, that all this was real and thinking useless.

Hundreds of others were going in our direction. All the paths converged on a flight of marble steps that led to the palace. The Khan, Vacameth told me, was holding a Public Court, which accounted for the host of people who had obviously come from far away lands.

"It is fortunate," he added, somberly, "that you arrived when you did. The apparitions of Vacameth the Saracen have lately given the Khan more dismay than joy. It is my hope that you will help me."

There wasn't time to ask him what he meant. I was to find out soon enough, but it was just about then that I first noticed that people had been looking at us with open smiles.

We went up the stairs and came into an enormous hall that must have held more than three thousand people. The crush on the outer fringe of the crowd was terrific. Most of the foreign visitors were there, sitting on carpets, gorging themselves and blowing off to each other about the gifts and curiosities they had brought the Khan.

At the north end of the hall, sitting high up on an elevation, was the mighty Kublai. Beneath him, arranged in a descending order according to rank, and none of them higher than the level of the Khan's feet, he looked down at his court, which beside the strangely dressed mass of foreigners, travelers and ambassadors, included his descendants down to his grandsons' wives, twenty-one legitimate sons, twenty-seven illegitimate sons, and hundreds of cavaliers, sorcerers, Christian priests, officers, falconers, heathen, Jewish and Mohammedan clergymen, astrologers and nobles.

Vacameth had been trying to make his way north, but it was impossible. We squatted on a carpet among a group of nobles who evidently knew Vacameth. Between mouthfuls, they greeted him and laughed when they asked about me. One of them in particular, a hairy son of a gun, wearing a jacket covered with decorations of elks' teeth, kept repeating that I had sad eyes like a donkey's.

After awhile it got under my skin and Vacameth noticed it. His moodiness had increased from the time we had entered the hall. I felt he was waiting for something important to happen, and that something, I knew, would concern me. He leaned over now and whispered that I must be careful in how I dealt with nobles, since they had no understanding of who I was. ". . . as indeed," he muttered, "no one has."



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I tried to make my eyes look less like a donkey's, but I suppose I didn't succeed, because the noble took hold of a huge bone, all he had left of what he had eaten, and threw it at me. "Here, donkey," he laughed, nourishment for your ordeal."

I got on my knees and leaned over and pulled the front of his jacket into my fist. Then I waved the bone under his nose and I said, "You pull that stunt once more and the next jacket you get'll have your own teeth on it, savvy?"

He savvied and he let out a wild yell, and probably he would have started something if the Emperor hadn't taken a drink. The Emperor was served by an army of attendants, all of them veiled, and every time he drank, one of the pages presented him with his goblet. Immediately a band of forty or fifty musicians would begin to play, and everyone in the hall had to bow down in prostration. So the Emperor, taking a drink, probably stopped a small riot from blossoming, and I had an enemy.

The minute the Emperor stopped drinking, Vacameth grabbed me and led me farther north, taking advantage of the momentary lull to make progress. We ducked the dozens of stewards who were madly running about with huge trays, carrying mountains of roast birds, game and fish, and gold flagons of milk from mares, camels and cows, and sat down in a gang that was distinguished from the rest by the white robes they wore, most of them like mine, though several also bore Vacameth's silver crest.

I was startled by the man who sat beside me. His head would have fascinated an anthropologist; a heavy, blunt, sloping skull, a wide mouth with a mere suggestion of lips, hair thick and matted—a perfect living specimen of a Neanderthal man. His huge teeth kept tearing away chunks of meat, and his little eyes roamed restlessly around the hall.

I was staring at his powerful, hairy forearms when Vacameth suddenly whispered, above deafening applause, "You will be called shortly." A troupe of tumblers had come into the hall and begun to entertain.

"Called? For what?"

"There is no time now to explain. Sufficient that the Emperor holds no belief in the astrologers who labor in the Court of Time. He tolerates us chiefly for the sake of amusement. This you must provide for him when you are called."

"Who—me? What am I supposed to do?"

"You are intelligent. Tell the court of your native land, of the people who dwell in it, of any marvelous things it may contain, but above all, be entertaining. It is vastly important for all of us."

Looking at his aged face and seeing his undisguised anxiety, I knew that he was touching upon the thing that had obviously been weighing on his mind from the moment we had started for the palace. The tumblers were retiring, and the Khan was looking expectantly in our direction. The applause and laughter died away as Vacameth took hold of me with a trembling hand and led me forward. We both kneeled.

The Khan spoke. "I have been apprised, learned doctor, that you bring a visitor of most unusual circumstance this day. Let him speak."



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I stood there foolishly, unable to utter a syllable. As he had pushed forward. I had glimpsed the face of the man whom I had called Coleridge, and the sight had unnerved me. Or perhaps it was the thought that I was about to speak to Kublai Khan—not awe or anything like it, but just the thought itself. Conceding reality had been one thing while I remained a spectator. It was quite a different thing now.

"Is he incapable of speech?" said the Khan, his round, pink face reflecting disappointment. He looked so small as he sat there, lost in the magnificence and luxury of his surroundings.

"Speak, I beg you!" Vacameth whispered frantically.

I tried to find Coleridge again, but he was one insignificant figure in that vast sea of faces, all smiling, waiting to be amused. I had determined to make it good.

"Great Khan," I began, "I come from a land where men dwell in houses as high as mountains, reaching to the sky. Millions live close together in cities, laboring at their tasks, eating food that has come to them from all corners of the earth. Many of them travel in iron wagons that run with the power taken from waterfalls, or made by the spinning of huge wheels, or in wagons which move because they cause a spark to ignite a liquid taken from the bowels of the earth.

"Our people work at contrivances that can sew, or do mathematical problems, or dig great ditches. Our fields are cultivated by machines whose power is so great that whether a man sows or reaps or threshes, a single man may perform the labor of hundreds . . ."

There had been isolated gasps of laughter, but for the most part the hall remained silent. The Khan was listening with a frown, and the others followed his example. Vacameth whispered, "You must sound more coherent!" I shrugged and kept going.

"We have ships that sail not because of wind, but fire, and some of our ships descend under the sea, like fish. So too, we have ships that can carry scores of people, flying like birds, past three hundred mile posts in an hour. We can make our voices heard a thousand miles away; we can dispel darkness with lanterns as bright as day; we can capture a scene forever, by means—"

The Emperor raised a hand and I stopped. "Tell me," he said, "where is this wonderful land?"

"If one travels west, perhaps twenty thousand miles away—if east, a fifth that distance, for my people know the earth to be round."

"Enough," said the Khan, and he fixed his gaze on Vacameth. "Most learned doctor, when credulity departs, it is accompanied by amusement." He waved a hand, and as Vacameth led me away, the musicians began to play and jugglers came running forward.

Shortly afterward, one of the nobles who stood near the Khan came to Vacameth and spoke quietly to him. Vacameth's face blanced and after that he sat quietly, refusing to eat or drink. Occasionally one or another of those men who wore the silver crests muttered at me. But I was hungry, and I divided my attention between the food and searching for Coleridge.

Pre-occupied as he was, Vacameth



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hadn't missed anything. When the last of the singers and dancers had performed and the Public Court had come to end, he rose and consulted the men who had spoken to him. Then he said to me, "I must leave you now for a time. The white robe you wear is your protector and guide. If you are lost, there are those who will know where to send you. Go now and do what you will, and come to me again before nightfall in that building where we met."

He took my hand again and looked at me carefully before he added, "But in one matter, though I cannot enforce it, I beg you to be cautious. If you meet the man Coleridge again, do not speak to him. Have nothing to do with him. I cannot say what the end may be if you disobey."

"You're asking for my word?" I said, as he waited for an answer.

"Yes."

"I can't promise. I must speak to him. Whatever meaning there is in this seems to be tied up with him."

As Vacameth left with the others, I knew I was right. He had been startled by my answer. I had betrayed knowledge of something which he had been certain he alone knew.

## Chapter IV

Half an hour later I saw Coleridge. Leaving the palace, I had given up the hopeless task of searching for him and let myself be swept along with the crowds. After a time I had passed through the second wall and found myself in the market place of the city. I became accustomed to the way people kept looking at me and wandered around in that fascinating bedlam, listening to the haggling, examining the worked leather, wood, stone, silver, bronze and innumerable combinations of these media and what craftsmen had done with them, taking little tastes of the puddings and roasts and soups that were offered to me, feeling the strange materials, gorgeous and undoubtedly very expensive, and yet hung out in the open marketplace, smelling the perfumes and perspiration and cooking odors that blended into one exotic, pungent smell.

All at once Coleridge had come up beside me. He was no longer wearing the white robe in which I had caught sight of him and was dressed instead in a long hooded gown that might have been a monk's.

"Here," he said, hurriedly, pressing a bundle of cloth against me. "Wear these and meet me presently at the side of a lake which lies east of the market, not far from here."

A moment later he was gone, lost in the jostling mob.

I went into a narrow alley and unfolded the bundle. It was a drab brown like the one Coleridge had worn, and with it a pair of open leather sandals. Waiting for a moment when the alley was empty, I slipped the gown over the rest of my clothes. I sat down and tore off my

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colorful socks, and just as I was putting on the leather sandals, a brown little soldier, encased in armor the size of a small beer barrel, appeared at one end of the alley.

He stood there with a calm display of interest, then came over and picked up the white sandals I had discarded, scowling at me.

I got up and said, "What's on your mind, Joe?"

Joe didn't answer. He merely waggled the white sandals at me, and when I walked out of the alley, he followed. I started through the market and he dogged me. I stopped to admire something and he waited. When I caught his eyes, he shook the sandals at me.

The market was too crowded to try running. I was about a foot taller than most of the people, and even with a slight lead I would be like a beacon. What I needed was a good lead. On the other hand, I had enough enemies already: Pai-Lo and his buddies, the guy who thought I looked like a donkey, and maybe soon Vacameth. I decided one more wouldn't matter particularly, so I looked around and found a tent that was strung with long banners of different cloths.

The Cathian merchant who owned it wanted to know what a monk was doing among lengths of gold cloth. I invited him inside, and Joe came along. When I found a good long section of cloth that I liked, a lovely streamer of green silk, I maneuvered the merchant between Joe and me.

Then I smiled piously, shoved the Cathaian against the soldier, yanked down the green silk and spun it around them. I had about three full spins around them before they even started bellowing. A swift kick to Joe's unarmored section knocked them both to the ground and I pushed my way through the throngs that came pouring into the tent.

Coleridge wasn't there when I got to the lake. I wondered if I had come to the wrong place, or whether . . . but there was no sense trying to figure out what might have happened to him. It was quiet here by the lake, and I sat on a stone bench under a shade tree. There were the fields that lay between the first two walls, and though a fair-sized city was contained within them, fallow deer grazed peacefully not far away. And the lake, clear as though it was but a few inches deep, was filled with large fish.

An old man sat down beside me, wheezing from the exertion of his walking. "I am a stranger," I said. "Is one permitted to fish here?"

"These be the Khan's fish," he sighed. "Fish if thou wilt. It will cost thee thine head."

As far as I was concerned, the conversation was ended. But the old man blinked at me merrily and said, "Thou art a strange monk indeed, with a face so pale in this land of constant sun. And if it were I who waited thus for a friend in dangerous circumstance. I would draw me my cowl over my head and straightaway tuck in the white robe that peeps from beneath thy gown "

The trailing sleeves of the white robe had come out from under the gown. I shoved it out of sight and stared at the old man. "How do you know who I'm waiting for?" I said.

"'Twas he who sent me, being unable to meet thee. Our friend Coleridge bids thee to bide the time until he will come again to thee It is his hope to come tonight, when thou may-



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est, if it please thee, join him in an adventure fraught with danger and romance." He rose from the bench and seemed about to leave.

"Wait a minute!" I cried, jumping up. "I don't understand this business. Who are you?"

"A simple man, an Englishman, a friend to both, and like thee, a traveler from an age distant to this. For in my own age, three hundred and some years hence, I am known as Broderick the miller, though the binding of ancient books is my pleasure. And now I must leave."

"I'll walk along with you," I said.

"A short way and no more," he sighed as I joined him. "We are forbidden commerce, as Vacameth has doubtless told thee."

"He warned me against Coleridge, but why you?"

"Because I might aid both him and thee, as forsooth, I have."

"But why can't I see Coleridge?"

A man astride a donkey rode past and Broderick turned his face away. Under his blue tunic I caught a glimpse of the same white robe that I was wearing. Evidently he too had been forced to disguise himself.

"Vacameth fears the link that binds thee to Coleridge," he said.

"Then there is a link?"

"'Twas known from the manner of thine appearance here, for thou emerged from air, as did all of us, yet with this difference, as the soldiers of Prince Sevasta swore—thou wert already walking beside Coleridge, engaged in conversation."

"But why should Vacameth fear this link?"

"This question, and the hundred others which I perceive trembling upon thy tongue, thou must ask Vacameth, for here we part company." He turned away from the lake and began walking in the direction of the third wall. A squad of soldiers, hanging on to the sides of a pony wagon, rumbled by. After they had gone, Broderick the miller turned and called, "Remember my message, false monk!"

It was night when Coleridge came to me. The city was asleep; an hour before the curfew bells had tolled in the new city of Taidu, across the river. I had given up seeing him when I glimpsed the shadow of his form coming through the arch that led to the balcony.

Until this moment the hours had dragged and my interest in the life around me had become perfunctory. Towards evening I had seen Vacameth again, and we had sat together on this same balcony, sipping spiced wine. He had evaded all my questions, begging my patience, and though he was anxious to know about the world from which I had come, he returned the favor by giving me the history of the city of Taidu. When I had mentioned Coleridge, he remembered how tired he was and left soon after.

But now I would find out. I had to fight to keep calm.

"Boland, are you here?"

"Here," I whispered, reaching out and touching him. My eyes had become accustomed to the darkness, and I could see that he was still wearing his hooded gown, the cowl raised to form a peaked cap.

"Good. Put on your monk's gown and come with me."

This was absurd, meaningless. He was talking to me as if we had known each other a long time, as if we were two friends about to undertake some casual, if clandestine, errand. He had



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even called me by my name. I just couldn't get it.

"Why do you hesitate?" he said, anxiously. "You haven't changed your mind, have you?"

"No," I said, finding my gown and putting it on. I had hidden it under my couch. "I'm ready."

We dropped from the balcony to the garden below, and began to run quietly along one of the raised pathways, heading, I thought, for the third inner wall where the palace was. Above us the waning moon was like a disinterested eye staring down from the black heavens. We kept running for several minutes, then all at once, though there was no sound to indicate pursuit, he pulled me from the path and made me lie down in the shadow of the pathway.

Minutes of unbroken stillness went by, then I saw a faint light in the distance, rapidly joined by others. Soon sandaled feet came pattering by overhead, and armor jingled as groups of soldiers ran past our hiding place. After a time we crept out and saw their lanterns like fireflies far away. We left the path and headed across the fields.

The battlements of the third wall were before us, cold and gray in the moonlight. The lanterns of sentries flickered near the gates, but we skirted the wall, Coleridge peering about carefully. Soon he found a large boulder which he moved to one side with surprising ease. From under it he took a long hemp rope with a heavy pronged hook tied to one end. We went farther along the wall until he stopped, swung the hook in a circle over his head and let it fly. It caught in one of the notches of the parapet and held firm against his full weight.

"Follow me over the wall," he said, quietly.

Once over the wall, we kept to the outer boundaries of the palace gardens, soon passing the smaller palace where Chingis, eldest son of Kublai, lived. And here a hill rose darkly, rising gradually for perhaps a hundred feet, its surface completely covered with hundreds of magnificent evergreen trees. Coleridge had stopped again.

Presently I heard a hushed, lovely melody, picked out on strings, coming, it seemed, from nowhere. Suddenly the darkness was lifting from the hill and I could see to its summit where a domed pavilion stood, and there was no longer darkness that was a pattern of shadows, but an unbelievable mixture of deep, subdued color, with every blade of grass a distinct thing, and each tree clearly defined, until I felt that something had been pushed aside before us, something that had hidden this before the music had come down from the pavilion.

It seemed to me that I had been here before, that this was the creation of memory, too perfect for reality. Then I felt a chill run through me. Coleridge was talking quietly as he stood beside me, talking to himself, speaking words that I knew, the words of his poem!

"So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree
And here were forests, ancient as the hills . . ."



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I found myself walking again, upward, past a brook whose surface shone like black glass—something sprang up from a little glen and ran straight at us! A moment afterward it has swerved and brushed by. It had been a sleeping deer we had startled.

Near the summit, Coleridge said, "Stand here and be my sentry. If the soldiers of Prince Sevasta approach, do not hesitate to cry out at once!" I watched him as he walked to the very top of the hill. When he reached the first tiny ornamental gate, the thin strain of melody stopped.

Later, I could barely remember what had happened. There was no sequence, but only something instantaneous and already completed at the moment of its beginning. Had there been a girl coming toward Coleridge? I had seen her flowing robe, the stateliness of her carriage, and as she had opened her arms, a jewel, perhaps a bracelet, had struck the moonlight a glancing blow.

Or had that sudden sliver of light come from the lantern which Vacameth had lit beside me? Light and sound of his voice had come together.

*"You shouldn't have come,"* he said, and his lantern had destroyed everything. When I looked quickly to the pavilion again, it was empty. There might never have been anyone there. Only this sickly lantern remained, throwing distorted shadows along the slope of the hill. The shimmering magic of the night had dissolved, and the moon gave no light.

Vacameth and I went back through the palace gardens in silence. Before we reached the south gate, footsteps as soft as rain were patting the earth on all sides of us. Dozens of lanterns, their faint radiance often reflected against fluted armor, were converging at the gate, and when we reached them, silent squads of palace guards and soldiers were waiting.

They had known Vacameth by his white robe, but their faces showed shock when they recognized me, for among them was Pai-Lo, he who had called me the Saracen's apparition once long ago, and the nobleman with whom I had quarreled at the Public Court. An incredulous murmur ran among them, but they made no effort to impede us. Vacameth had opened the front of my monk's gown and shown them the white cloth underneath. Then opened the gate and let us through.

Presently Vacameth had led me back to that long corridor where life had pulsed through the day. It was dark and empty now. We entered a chamber where a man lay sleeping, and from there to numerous others, until we had quietly traversed a circle that led back to the corridor. There had been sleepers in every chamber, men and women with strangely different faces, some who had slept peacefully, others who had tossed and mumbled, a few who had stirred at the passage of our light. Close by each had been a folded white robe and a diversity of other articles; a dagger, a Bible, once a coat of chain mail, and in that room where I again saw the brute who had been in the court, as he lay crouched on the floor, in his hands had been a leathern bag of round stones.

We returned to the chamber where I had first seen Vacameth. He sat on the broad sill of his window, the moonlight flooding past him to lie in a white pool on the floor.

"Among those you saw," Vacameth spoke, "was a Frankish crusader, whose lifetime is separated from this



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night by a hundred years. He found himself in Acre, among the last of his comrades, surrounded in their camp by the infidels they had come to conquer. Yesterday, as he knew it, he was wounded, and he lay dying in an alien land. He vowed, while fever and delirium ran through him, that he would yet see the glory of that land he had always heard about, believing the promises of those who had led him. And so he came here. He has been her four days. He may return to his own time at the moment of his death, perhaps never knowing that the glory he sought belonged to another age . . .

"You saw a primitive being, a man not yet Man, unable to speak or comprehend his surroundings. He is rare even in this Court of Time, coming from an age many thousands of years gone. What brought him here? Perhaps an incalculable wonder as he saw the sun rise each day, or watched the chemistry of age change his forebears. The thought remained a vague stirring in his crude brain, but for one intense moment he must have perceived a continuity. He must have known then that day would follow day, and time alter all things. Half animal though he is, something in him cried out to span numberless days—to see what might be in a time when he would be no more.

"So you have all come, travelers through time, brought here by some great emotion that unlocks the doors that separate the ages. Passion, fear, piety, lust—some transcendant emotion—and the knowledge which is ours in this Court of Time."

He turned to me for the first time since he had begun to speak, his eyes blank, unseeing fields.

"We know so little, as I have told you," he said softly, "but one thing we know . . . our knowledge will be lost! This is the thought that haunts us. All our work is directed toward finding the faulty link in the chain of the future. None of those who has come here knows of this phenomenon of transference through time. It is unknown fifty years from now, as it is unknown in your day. But we must find that flaw and we must alter it! Our knowledge must persist!

"Do you understand? We must guard against everything. The man Coleridge came here from a secret, scarcely realized yearning to see this land, and from unhappiness in his own time. When you came, you were already with him. Can you help me discover why?"

"I don't know, unless . . ." I hesitated. "He was a famous poet even before his death, but the greatest of his poems was never finished. It was a poem he had written about this land and the court of the Khan. I always felt—"

"You felt it had to be finished?" Vacameth whispered.

"Yes," I said. "It had always affected me . . . deeply."

"Alas!" cried the old man, shaking his head. "This is a link which we, in our ignorance, must fear. Never before has anyone come because of another who preceded him."

"But you must have known I was coming!" I said. "There were soldiers guarding him, as if they were waiting for me."

"No," said Vacameht, turning away. "They were the soldiers of Prince Sevasta, and the guards of the Court of Time. I cannot tell you why he is so closely guarded. You must



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not inquire, you must not think the thoughts that are with you even as I speak. Know then—the poem of which you speak could never have been finished!"

"But why?" I said, and the thoughts to which Vacameth had referred became a rushing whirlpool drawing me to a hidden vortex, and I was remembering . . . *The author . . . composed no less than three hundred lines, if that indeed can be called composition in which the images rose up as things* . . . "There was more!" I said. "Tonight I heard him speaking the lines of his poem!"

*"That was yesterday."*

"But I was there—a short time ago!"

"Do you remember how everything in your perception changed when you approached the Green Mount? That was because he had taken you with him again, to a day past. You were seeing things as he saw them, in a yesterday that will never change for him . . ."

"But it must change! You said yourself that you were searching for a lost link. If the past can be altered he can finish the poem—I don't understand—"

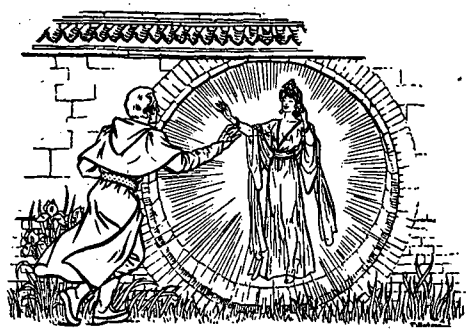
"Your understanding is of no consequence!" Vacameth cried, rising up, anger flaming in his eyes. "Heed my warning. If you go again with him to the Green Mount, yours will be a punishment as terrible as his . . . *I will take away from you all remembrance of that which will be most precious to you!"*

## Chapter V

I was unable to sleep that night. Again I would remember that veiled moment when the light had flashed and everything had vanished like a substanceless dream, and hear again a faint melody and a voice beside me, speaking the lines I knew so well . . .

"And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread . . ."

In the morning, exhausted, I put on my white robe again. I had no eyes now for the girls who brought me food,



but eating as quickly as I could, I went out into the morning.

There was no question in my mind as to whether I would take Vacameth's warning. I felt that I couldn't have done anything about it if I had wanted to; I was in too far, and a strange compulsion was forcing me to go on. So I wandered through the city of Kanbalu, searching for Coleridge, but there was no trace of him.

It was late in the afternoon when I came again to the lake where I had spoken to Broderick the miller—and there, sitting on that same stone bench, sat Coleridge! I ran to him and called his name. He turned with a cry of joy



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and grasped my hand emotionally.

"I hoped you would remember!" he cried. "I had no way of getting another message to you and I looked for you everywhere."

"We must get away from here," I said, hurriedly. "The guards must be near and I must talk to you before—"

"Have no fear," he laughed. "Vacameth himself forbade their interference several hours ago."

"Vacameth! But why?"

"Why is no concern of mine. I revel in this freedom, and would it had come earlier, for then I might have been able to come to you last night to ask your aid, as good Broderick told you."

"Last night?" I said in sudden confusion. "But you did come!"

He seemed startled for a moment, then he laughed again. "You're making sport of me. You Colonials are a droll lot indeed. I wanted to convey my compliments on the excellence of the discourse you presented to the Public Court yesterday. The colonies will go far, now they're free of England, even if they never reach that magic state."

"The colonies? . . ."

"Yes. Didn't you say you came from America?"

"When did I tell you this?"

He looked at me dubiously, and the smile left his face. "I believe you are fatigued," he said. Your eyes are shot through with blood, your hands are unsteady. Would you rather leave off for another time?"

"I'm all right. Tell me when I said these things."

He answered slowly: "When you first arrived. You were walking on a pathway behind me when I turned and saw you, and the odd clothes you wore. We talked until the soldiers came. You fought them and created considerable devastation until one crept up behind you. It was your splendid combativeness that resolved me to ask your aid."

"Yes, I remember." I lied. "This dream that came alive bewilders me sometimes." I had realized by then everything that lay between us. The man who was here beside me was also a century and a half removed from me. I could have told him the name of his next poem, the next place he would live, the success of a book—the date of his death! "Tell me," I said. "You want me to help you in some way?"

"In an affair of the heart. I say it plain." He was smiling again, and he was a different man from the one he had been the night before. His voice was buoyant, alive; he seemed a happy man indeed, this Coleridge whose biographies were—or were to be—the story of a melancholy life.

"How can I help you?" I said.

"Each man comes here seeking something, as you must know from Vacameth. Yesterday I met an Abyssinian maid, with whom I fell in love—"

"Yesterday?"

"Ah," he sighed, smiling, "it must have been the day before. The days here have lost their meaning; they have been the happiest of my life. But meet her I did, and our love is all that matters. She is the Princess Kalay, sent here by her father to serve the Empress. When we realized our love, I went at once to Vacameth and told him. He forbade me to see her again, because Sevasta had already been to him.

"We travelers from other times are deemed charlatans and story-tellers,



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as you know. Kublai protects us as a whim, but should he withdraw his benevolence and subsidies, the Court of Time would cease to exist. This Vacameth fears more than anything, being, I have heard, engrossed in labors dear to him. And the Princess Kalay is also the unwilling object of the Prince Sevasta's love. Sevasta is a mighty Captain, possessor of a golden tablet, friend of the Bailo Singui and other to whom the Kublai gives ear.

"When Sevasta heard of my love for Kalay, he threatened Vacameth. He sent his soldiers to guard against our meeting. But it will not avail him, for Kalay sent a message to me with a servant, bidding me meet her when I could on the summit of the Green Mount. She waits for me tonight and I will go to her.

"And here, friend Boland, you may help me, for I will need a sentry against Sevasta's soldiers. You are tall and strong, and from your laughter during yesterday's combat, you find pleasure in a fight. Will you do me this service?"

I couldn't answer for awhile, then I managed to ask him, "Have you ever met her on this Green Mount?"

"Never before, but tonight will be the first of many."

"But . . . in time . . . you will leave here. There must be a parting someday. What do you hope to accomplish with this hopeless love?"

"I do not think of that. I have been here an eternity already, and when I leave, I will take with me this memory, more precious than anything in life."

A chill swept through me as he spoke those words, the echo of Vacameth's warning: *"Yours will be a punishment as terrible as his . . . I will take away all remembrance of that which will be most precious to you . . ."*

"Will you help me?"

"Yes," I nodded. "I must help you."

He came again that night, shortly after the curfew bells had darkened the city. I was on the balcony, waiting, when his white-robed figure came hurrying along the court wall and leaped down. The moon, which tonight would be a thin crescent, had not risen.

"Come," said Coleridge, taking my hand.

The moment he touched me, everything changed. The moon, as if some great hand had suddenly thrown it there, shone down from the night sky. The darkness faded into the somber colors I had seen the night before, and remembering how I had first noticed the transformation at the foot of the Green Mount, I realized that it had happened before then, and only my perception had been at fault.

When we ran along the path, it seemed to me that the very rhythm of our footsteps was a repetition. We left the path and hid again, long before pursuit appeared, and when it had passed us, we headed across the fields again. At precisely the same place, Coleridge found the boulder and the hemp rope under it, and threw it over the walls.

"Follow me," he whispered, as he had the night before . . .

And now, as we came in sight of the Green Mount, I knew that Vacameth had meant when he said, *"That was yesterday."* For in every minute detail, this was yesterday—the soft rattle of a displaced pebble, its wet, upturned surface reflecting the



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light, the alarming gust of wind that shook a young tree before us—even that moment when Coleridge snapped a twig and awakened a sleeping deer!

I knew the meaning of fear then more than I had ever known it. I felt as if I had to remember to keep breathing, and I dragged myself closer to the origin of that ghostly melody, hearing the hushed voice beside me speaking to itself . . . *"A damsel with a dulcimer in a vision once I saw . . ."* And yet, somehow I knew I had to be careful, to see exactly what happened. I watched him reach the gate. I saw the girl coming toward him—saw her raise her arms and the light flash!—and the instant disintegrated.

There, a few feet away, stood Vacameth, a circle of soldiers all around him, and the empty hill yellow from their lanterns.

I was too exhausted to resist them when they sprang at me and tied my hands behind my back. A slender man, taller than the rest, and wearing a pointed helmet and a silver cape, approached me. He regarded me wonderingly and stuck out a curled blade to touch me, as if he was unsatisfied that I was really there.

He whirled about in anger and cried, his thin face drawn together, "Cursed Saracen! Rid this mount of your apparition!" He swung his long blade at me as if debating whether to sink it into my ribs, but Vacameth hurried forward between me and the blade.

"I have given you my word, Sevasta," he said, with a cold, weary dignity. "It will never happen again."

He held out a hand, and a servant brought him a goblet and a tiny metal vial. With trembling hands he opened the vial and held it over the goblet. A single drop of liquid stretched tenuously down and the goblet lit up as if with an inner fire.

"Drink."

He held the goblet to my lips and tilted it. There was no taste, scarcely any sensation at all.

Prince Sevasta went behind me and with a single, quick stroke of his blade, cut the cords that tied my hands.

"And now that your fool's magic is done," he spat out contemptuously, "leave while there is mercy in me!"

The soldiers spread out in a semicircle, their lanterns a scimitar lighting our way, and Vacameth and I walked to the gate. When they left us, Vacameth spoke to me. There was no anger, no emotion in him now, but only a vast, yielding weariness.

"I hoped to the last that you would listen to me. This morning, seeing you still sought him, I let you meet. I thought you must realize that I had spoken the truth when I warned you."

"I couldn't stop," I mumbled. "I realized only how inextricably woven together my being here was with his and when I discovered at last why he had never finished his poem—"

"I told you it could never be finished. He came here seeking happiness, and he might have returned with it, for all happiness is but the memory of its existence. But now he rises each morning and happiness seems to wait for him, and he goes each night on his secret errand, slipping at the very instant he begins back to that last night when he was almost in her arms.

"It will always be the same: he will never find her. As long as he is here, complete happiness will elude him. And when he returns to his own time, then will the full force of his



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punishment come to dwell with him . . . for he will never remember more than a fragment! Time has stopped for him, and so it will be until he dies."

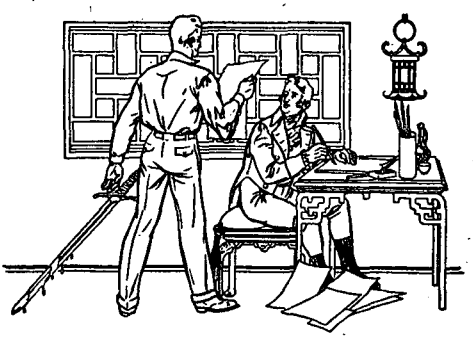
We had returned to the looming shadows of the Court of Time. Vacameth took my hand and said gently. "And so it will be for you. This most precious memory, this realization of the reason he never finished his poem, will be lost. When you awake again, everything that happened tonight—these very words I speak to you—will be gone from your memory. Between your last waking moment and your first waking one, the slate will be wiped clean. So long as you remain here, you may go with him each night on his errand to the Green Mount. No one will see you, no one will hear you. For it will be yesterday again, the yesterday that never ends. And when you return to your own time, you will be haunted by this elusive, incomplete memory . . ."

But there was something he hadn't reckoned with.

## Chapter VI

It struck me even as Vacameth walked away. Before I would awaken again, he had said. That meant I had time still, for until I went to sleep I could remember, and I wasn't going to sleep just yet.

Searching my pockets, I found a handful of matches. I went into the Court and went down the corridor to the door where Vacameth had taken me the night before. Then I started going through the chambers where Vacameth's travelers lay sleeping, striking matches in each room, until I came to where I had seen the coat of



mail. Beside it, in a heavy scabbard, lay a huge broadsword. I strapped it on and kept going.

If I was right! And so far I was—Coleridge lay asleep in one of the chambers. I struck a match and awakened him. He jerked up and recognized me.

"Why didn't you come?" I whispered. "I've been waiting."

He got up immediately and dressed. He seemed bewildered at the thought that he had fallen asleep. He couldn't thank me enough for coming to get him. When he saw the great sword hanging at my side, it alarmed him, but he said nothing.

And this time, when we came outside and the night had become transformed, I was ready for it and the moonlight filled me with elation. We were back in that yesterday when Coleridge had first failed to see this girl that meant so much to him. This time it would be different!

I let him lead me as he had done twice before. I let the hurrying soldiers pass and climbed the wall with him. I had determined my course of action in advance, but as we crept through the Khan's garden I became uncertain. Had it been necessary to change everything that had happened that night?



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Had I made an error in not doing each little thing in some new way—or would one faulty link in this chain of events be enough to make the difference? Maybe, I thought, the events were leading me! Maybe the entire pattern was inescapable, and no matter what I planned, I would have to relive that pattern!

I gripped Coleridge's arm. "Not this way," I whispered. "We must avoid the palace of Chingis and approach the Mount from another way."

He looked at me wonderingly. "But this is the way," he said. 'I have been over it many times by day."

"I see the lanterns of soldiers ahead."

"Where? I see nothing. You are mistaken."

"Believe me, my eyes see farther than yours."

He hesitated, as if the decision was beyond him, and finally, reluctantly, he nodded in agreement. We started skirting the inner wall of the palace, but after we had taken a few steps, he stopped. "We cannot go this way," he said. "There is a river between the Mount and the palace, and the only bridge across is well guarded."

The events were leading me! There was nothing I could do. I went back with him, wondering what to do. In a panic I waited for the moment when he would kick away the pebble and saw it happen . . . and I waited for the precise instant when the wind would stir again, and I heard it. It would be over presently, before anything had been—but no!—for together with the wakening of the deer, I had drawn my broadsword.

In blind, frightened flight, it came toward us, its lovely head arched straight forward as it sped ahead. I raised the huge sword over my head and the instant it brushed by I brought the blade down. The cruel stroke caught its spine, almost cutting the poor animal in two. It fell to the ground at our feet like a stone, without a whimper, without ever knowing what had happened to it.

And then, sickened though I was, I realized that Coleridge had not even seen what I had done. He was scrambling on ahead, as if the music were drawing him, oblivious of everything else. I ran after him, the bloody sword in my hand. I dreaded each moment that sped by.

Before I could get to him, he had left the shelter of the last trees that surrounded the bald summit. The music stopped . . . I saw him open the little gate. I crept closer and heard a girl's voice call to him. The Princess Kalay appeared, walking toward him across the terrace, her arms outstretched, waiting for him. In spite of myself, an involuntary shudder ran through me and I closed my eyes.

When I looked again—they were gone! In despair I ran to the pavilion, leaped over the gate. And there they were standing together in the shadow of a broad cupola, in each other's arms! It had worked! Whatever had prevented these two from meeting that first night had failed this time.

I edged back across the terrace, unwilling to intrude, and started back down the hill. Tomorrow I would see Coleridge again; tomorrow when this poem had been completed in his mind, and then . . . What then, I wondered. I would hear all of the poem, and with the little stub of a pencil and the scraps of paper I had in my trousers pockets, I would copy the rest of it! Even then, while vague appre-



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hensions of the enormity of this change were beginning to take form in my mind, I suddenly thought—what if tomorrow I were gone? What if he were gone?

I couldn't conceive it, I supposè I thought to myself: if he returns now to his own time and finishes the poem—then everything connected with it would change! Instead of a fragment of a poem, when I next looked into that little red volume of Coleridge's poetry, I would find all of it there! And that would mean that from that summer's day in 1797 on, every reference to this peom would be changed . . .

The Author's Note would be different. The letter Lamb had written Wordsworth about it would be unwritten. The *Edinburgh Review*, which had ridiculed the peom when it appeared in 1816, would have an entirely new review of it. The pamphlet in which Coleridge had published *Kublai Khan*, together with *Christabel* and *The Pains of Sleep*, would be changed altogether, every copy of it. Every reference, every text, every collection of poems, every treatise, every high-school boy's exam, every memory that anyone had ever had about this poem would be changed.

It was impossible. It couldn't happen. Somewhere, something was to recast this new form in which events were taking shape. My mind refused to think about it anymore.

Suddenly, from where I stood, I saw figures running. I crept in closer and saw Vacameth and Prince Sevasta standing at the foot of the hill, in the middle of a score of soldiers, like ghostly figures in the moonlight. A soldier had just come running to Sevasta.

"Sire!" he panted, "The man you seek is even now with the Princess Kalay in the pavilion!"

"Nonsense," said Vacameth, irritably. "No one could have reached the pavilion without awkening some of the animals that sleep on the Mount. Recover your senses. We depend on the swift perceptions of the animals for our alarm."

"But look!" the soldier cried, holding out his hands. "Here are my palms, wet with the blood of a doe newly slain upon the Mount!"

Prince Sevasta cried out in fury. "Surround the Mount at once! Pai-Lo, race immediately to summon the palace guards! And you, deceitful Saracen, follow me to witness the end of your dupe!"

Vacameth clutched the Prince's arm, begging him to be calm, promising him to undo the harm. He would be successful, I knew. Sevasta would allow Vacameth to punish Coleridge, and the end would be the same. The deer had been a link, but it alone had not been enough. And while Vacameth pleaded with the Prince, I had time.

I ran back to the pavilion, calling Coleridge's name. He heard me, and came out from under the cupola, Kalay still with him, both of them frightened. He looked at me strangely and said, "Who are you? What do you want with me?"

I looked down at my clothes. The white robe I had been wearing was gone. I was dressed in the tweed suit I had worn underneath. In fear and amazement I cried, "They've found you! Sevasta and his soldiers have surrounded the hill! Save your questions and follow me!"

I had to shove him to make him move. He took the girl's hand and ran



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after me across the pavilion. I was going down the other side of the Mount, hoping to avoid Sevasta. But it was too late! Already a string of lanterns were ascending the hill and we could hear the soldiers calling to each other. We stood flat against a huge tree and waited for the soldiers to come up. Everywhere there was movement; as Vacameth had said, the Mount had been filled with sleeping animals that sought its shelter at night.

Closer and closer the lights came. I raised the great sword over my head and stood steady. The steady sound of their advancement continued until the light of a lantern touched the tips of my shoes. I swung around from behind the tree and let the sword come down. The figure slumped to the ground and the lantern rolled over and went out.

"Quick! Follow me down!" I whispered.

We started running again, stumbling and groping in the darkness, guided only by an occasional shaft of light that came through the trees, knowing only that we were going downhill. The others had seen the lantern go out. I heard their calls increase, and saw the other lanterns converging toward the spot where I had killed the soldier. A moment later they were shouting and screaming the alarm.

At the bottom of the Mount I stopped. We've got to return the Princess to her quarters," I said to Coleridge. "How do we get there?"

"There is no way, save across a guarded bridge," said Kalay.

"Lead us to it," I said.

We moved in a circle, back toward the Khan's palace, keeping to the shadows as much as possible. Soon we saw the moon reflected from the surface of a wide stream. The stone bridge across it was fifty yards away, across an open space. A helmeted soldier stood at either approach. They would see us the minute we stepped into the clearing.

"Wait here," I said.

I took off my coat and put the sword into it, using the length of both sleeves as a scabbard, protecting the blade from the moonlight. Then, holding the coat in front of me, one hand firm on the sword's figured guard, I started walking across the open space toward the bridge. They saw me before I had taken five steps. I kept going at a slow pace, hoping to throw them off guard, and as I had expected, they came together at the center of the bridge, looking toward me and evidently talking.

When I was thirty feet from the bridge, they braced their legs and raised their long pikes. There was sudden death waiting at the end of those fierce points.

"Who approaches the palace of the Khan?" one of them called.

Every foot was precious now. I reached the bridge and stopped. I leaned against the stone wall, saying nothing, standing there quite casually. One of them came toward me and brought the point of his staff a few inches from my chest. I swallowed and remained still.

The second soldier, puzzled, raised his staff so that he could come closer. "Speak!" he demanded. I judged the distances carefully; he was still too far away. I wanted him to come about halfway down the ten foot length of the first pikestaff, so that it would be between him and me when I



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moved aside, and his pike useless at that short range.

I whispered something he couldn't possibly hear. He came in closer. I moved swiftly to the right, away from the outstretched staff, grabbed it just below the point and yanked. It almost pulled the soldier off his feet. With my right hand I brought the broadsword up in a quick stroke to the soldier who had approached me. It sank into his groin. He flopped forward on it. I yanked it out and he fell against his comrade's pikestaff. Two long steps and I was on the other one before he could back up to use his unwieldy weapon. The flat of the blade smashed against his face. He dropped his staff, flew against the side of the bridge and tumbled over into the stream. Before the staff had stopped rattling on the stone, I signalled Coleridge to come on.

We crossed the bridge and kept close to the palace wall, and when we reached one of the entrances to the palace, Coleridge took Kalay in his arms briefly and spoke to her. We watched her run up the marble stairs and disappear from view. He turned to me with wonder in his eyes.

"Not now," I said. "We've still got to get out."

But how would we get out? There was no rope now. There was only one way—back to the south gate, and it would be hopeless for two of us to try that. When we came to the outer battlements I stopped.

"Listen to me," I said. "Don't ask me any questions, just listen. You don't remember me. That's not important now. But you're a poet, aren't you? And you've been speaking lines tonight, lines that will be a part of a poem when you return to your own time. Well then, the most important thing is for you to get out now. Do you know anything about getting back to one's own time—about how it's done?"

"Yes. Vacameth told me that each returns to his own time when his reason for coming here has been satisfied. When that happens, one leaves here as suddenly as one came."

A stifling fear gripped me. "You mean we can't leave here when we want to—somehow?"

He nodded. "Our conscious volition had as little part on our leaving as it had in our arrival."

"But you've no reason to stay here any more!"

"I have a reason. Kalay."

"And your poem?"

"It is clear in my mind. In my chamber I have a quill and vegetable dyes that Vacameth gave me. When I return there I will be able to write down everything. But why do—"

"Never mind," I cut him short. That must have been the reason he was still here, I thought; maybe the act of writing the lines was it. I stood close to the wall and cupped my hands to form a step. "You're going over the wall," I said. "Promise me that the instant you return to your room you'll write the rest—all of the poem. Before you go to sleep—before you do anything else!"

He couldn't make head or tail of it. Finally he said, "But what will happen to you?"

I wished I could have answered that.

"Over you go," I muttered. He put a foot into my hands and I propelled him high enough to get a grip on the parapet. He clambered up and dropped down out of sight.

Then I stood there foolishly, half



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expecting to disappear from the moonlit garden; to find myself back in the library stacks . . . and a strange little red volume in my hands . . . But nothing happened. My reason for coming, then, must have been incomplete, I thought. Maybe it would end for me too when he had written the last lines. I had to make certain! I cursed myself for letting him out of my sight. Maybe he had been caught on the other side. I hadn't heard anything.

There was only one thing to do now: get back to the Court of Time myself. I looked around and got my bearings, then started along the wall for the south gate.

I don't know what I must have been thinking. There was a reception committee waiting for me at the gate, half a hundred savage little men, armed with pikes, spears, scimitars, and barbarous spiked clubs. They could have annihilated me with one rush but they didn't move. It took me a few seconds to realize why.

It was because it was still *yesterday*. They had known that Coleridge was in the gardens. They didn't know who I was. Even Vacameth didn't know. I was here at least a day before he would know I had come, if things worked out the same way, though I didn't see how they possibly could any more. I was back in that yesterday before they knew about me—any of them, just a big fellow in outlandish clothes, carrying a huge, bloody broadsword cradled in his arms. The other times, somehow, this yesterday had ended abruptly, with Vacameth waiting on the Mount for me to appear. I had changed that, I saw, and this sudden appearance had become an advantage I hadn't counted on, but it didn't last long.

It was Prince Sevasta who thought he had it worked out first.

"This is a trick!" he ground out, furiously, his eyes gleaming yellow from the lanterns, looking at the sword in my arms. He smashed Vacameth across the face with his hand. "Dog!" he cried. "You have lied for the last time! Your fool has taken off the white robe that was his salvation!"

I held my sword ready as several of the soldiers started for me. "Hold!" said Sevasta. "Let no one touch him. Sevasta alone will deal with him."

His face taut and his eyes fixed on me, the Prince removed his silks until he stood stripped to the waist, wearing only a short skirt and his golden pointed helmet. From one of the soldiers he took a long, delicately curved scimitar that shone in the moonlight along every sinister ripple that had been hammered into the blade. He swung it once or twice expertly and started for me. Ten feet away he stopped, waiting until I held my sword up, estimating me.

The broadsword had never been intended for skilled personal combat. It was too long, too heavy and unmaneuverable. I might have asked for a blade like Sevasta's, except that this was obviously not a duel but an impending murder. And had he given me the blade, I might have been worse off; I had never even held one before.

Sevasta crouched and sprang forward on cat's feet. The scimitar lashed out. Instinctively I ducked back and pushed the broadsword up. The scimitar clashed against the flat with a harsh ring. Before the sound had died away, Sevasta lunged forward and the air whistled around me. I couldn't see his blade half the time, it was moving so fast. I kept stepping back, using



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my sword as a shield. It was like playing tennis in a way: my opponent had caught me off guard and he closed in with sharp smashes, and I was safe only so long as I could retreat fast enough to catch each successive blow.

Again and again he lunged, darting to my left, recoiling suddenly to the right, steel clashing against steel. Sevasta's breath came in long gasps, his lips were curling crookedly. All at once I felt something behind me. I had been backed against the outer wall!

Sevasta cried out in delight, his scimitar held ready. I brought a foot up and pressed it against the wall, and as Sevasta sprang toward me, I pushed myself forward, broadsword before me in both hands, meeting his downstroke over my head. I kept ramming in, got a foot behind him, and before he could get away, I bulled him off balance. The broadsword came down in a swift arc. He swayed to one side and the sword passed by him. It must have looked to him that the momentum of the stroke would carry me around, leaving my right side open. It was only partly so, because I had anticipated him.

As I swung past him, he darted in on his toes, crouching low and bringing the scimitar in. At the same instant I heaved the broadsword up in a looping curve, utilizing the momentum of the preceding stroke and bringing it down swiftly. Sevasta saw the sword coming when it was a foot over his head. I remember the way his lips hung, and his eyes, half shut, rolled upwards. The edge of the sword caught him on the shoulder and kept going down into his body. When he fell the sword was still moving down. It stopped only when the point sank into the earth, and a dark pool of blood surrounded it. Sevasta's eyes were still open, his hand still held the scimitar.

I looked toward the gate. The soldiers were standing silently. None of them made a move. I picked up my coat, held the broadsword up, and started for the gate. They moved aside when I reached them. I drew the bars and passed through. The path ahead was empty. Far off the white walls of the Court of Time gleamed in the moonlight.

When I entered the corridor, I went directly to the chamber where I had found Coleridge. He was sitting before a window, writing. He saw me as I came in and rose to meet me. I was completely exhausted. I let the sword drop from my hands and picked up the sheet on which he had been writing. It was made of some thin substance, filled with clear, finely written lines.

"Is it done?" I asked.

He was about to answer, but as he looked past, I followed the direction of his gaze. Vacameth had come into the room, and an imperceptible change had come over everything again. The room darkened and I saw that I was wearing the white robe again. Vacameth knew me now.

Softly, he said, "Remember my words. Do you have what you came here for?"

I took the thin sheet and folded it into a little ball.

"It will never be finished," said Vacameth.

I put the tiny ball of paper into my mouth.

"It is finished," I said. "I have what I came for . . ."

I was sitting in one of the alcoves



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at the Dutch Kitchen, alone. A half-empty beer glass stood before me and Harry had come out from behind the bar to bring me some pretzel sticks.

"Everything okay, Ricky?" he said.

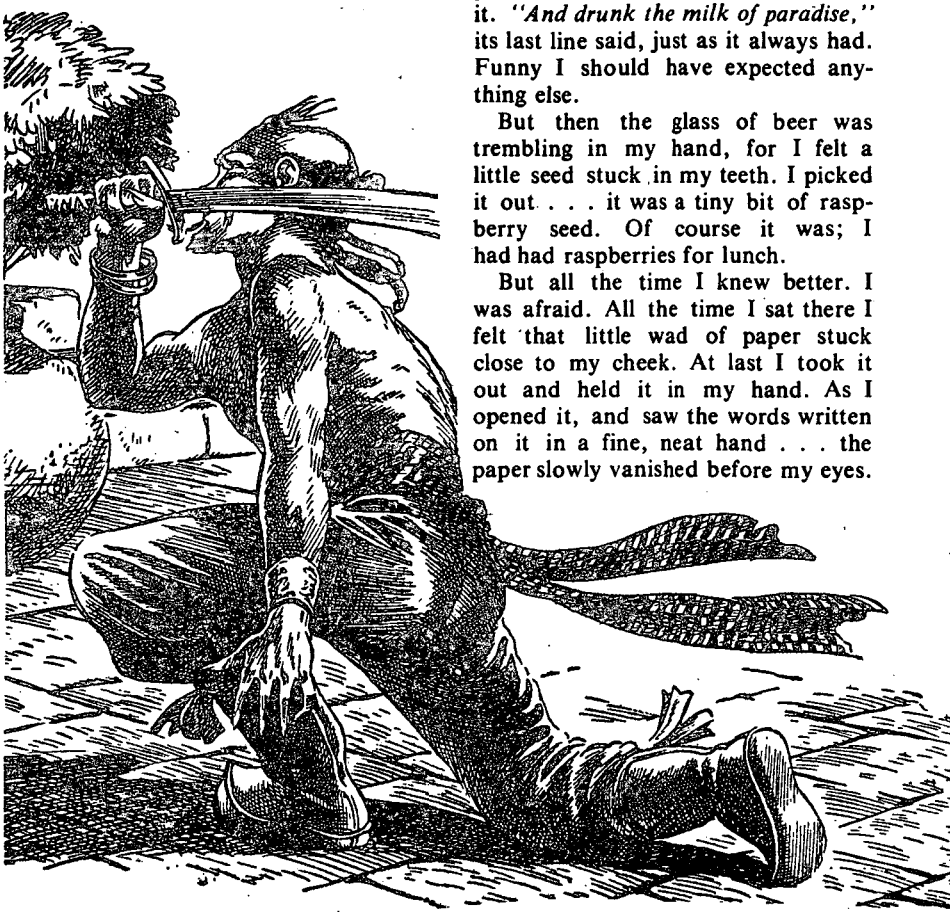
"Everything's okay, Harry."

That was the way it happened. I had no recollection of having left the library of having walked down the hill to this place. There was a stack of books on the seat next to me, the ones I had intended taking home for the week-end. My watch said it was 6:10, approximately half an hour had passed since I last remembered being in the library. I must have left about half an hour before; it would have taken me that much time to get to the Kitchen.

I thought I must have become so absorbed in my work that I had hardly known what I was doing. These odd fragments of thoughts that flitted through my mind . . . I picked up the little red volume of Coleridge's poems and glanced casually through it. *"And drunk the milk of paradise,"* its last line said, just as it always had. Funny I should have expected anything else.

But then the glass of beer was trembling in my hand, for I felt a little seed stuck in my teeth. I picked it out . . . it was a tiny bit of raspberry seed. Of course it was; I had had raspberries for lunch.

But all the time I knew better. I was afraid. All the time I sat there I felt that little wad of paper stuck close to my cheek. At last I took it out and held it in my hand. As I opened it, and saw the words written on it in a fine, neat hand . . . the paper slowly vanished before my eyes.



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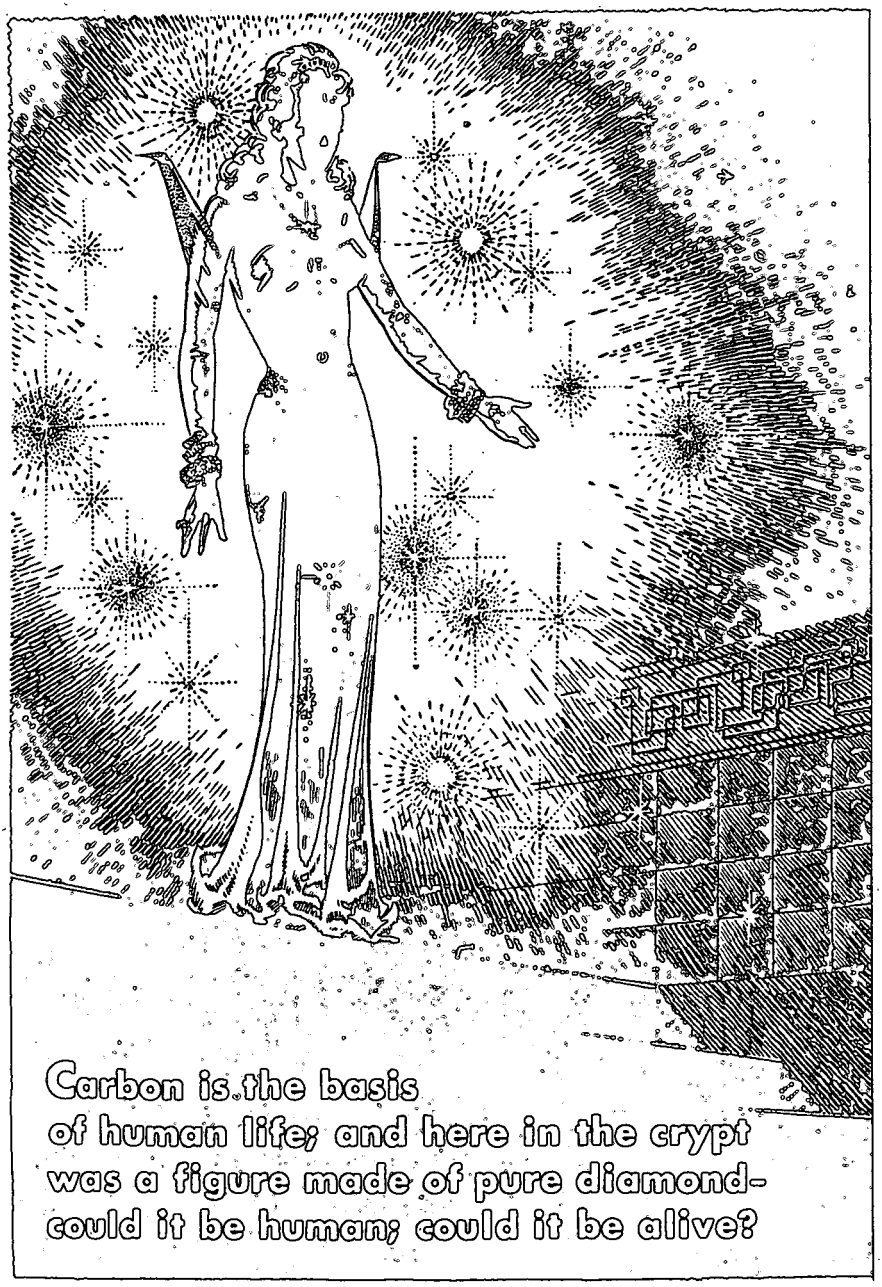




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# HEART OF LIGHT

## GARDNER F. FOX

Illustrated by JULIAN S. KRUPA

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HUBBARD unearthed the statue in a rubble of sand and masonry a thousand centuries old. He brushed it off and set it up in his tent amid the rest of his archaeological finds. And that night it spoke to him.

It was just after he had seated himself at his tiny desk to examine the odd, delicately carven vases and broken urns that had so piqued his curiosity that morning. Hubbard was an archaeologist, and an expert despite his thirty years. He had chosen this remote and unexplored section of the Australian desert land for his researches, hoping to unearth proof of the fabulously ancient land continent of Gondwanaland.

Already he felt certain of some measure of success, for these shards of bronze were ages old, worn with the passage of countless centuries. And with curve and angle and bas-relief so etched that his breath caught in his throat as he surveyed them.

But they were—strange!

He knew of no race whose carvings took such drastic tangents from recognized art forms. The things they depicted, too: this one, for instance, showed a space ship curving against the sky. Elongated and with a flaring tail that seemed to be rocket jets. Hubbard paused, startled. What is wrong with me? he thought. I'm letting these things get on my nerves. Spaceship? A meteor, rather, curving against the background that was speckled with stars. A meteor, he said to himself and laughed.

"Laughter!" whispered a voice.

"Eh? What's that?"

Hubbard lifted his head and stared around him, into the gloomy corners, at the piled reliquaries whose shadows chased one another in the light of the flickering oil lamp on the desk. Nothing here. Probably his imagination; he'd been too long alone, out on these vast distances.

"Laughter. Human laughter, again. After all these eons, these untold eons of darkness. Someone did laugh?"

Hubbard stared at the statue, the skin prickling on his neck.

"I laughed," he answered slowly, curiosity beating back the nameless fear that pulsed against him. "I laughed at this—this bas-relief I'm holding. You don't—mind?"

"Laugh again for me. Please! It is so long since I heard the sound of the human voice. So long . . ."

It *was* the statue. God!

Hubbard got up and eased the revolver in the holster at his side around in front of him. He unfastened the flap-catch, and wrapped his big brown hand around the butt. Holding the gun, he walked to the statue, bent to look closer.

It was lifesize, this bronze representation of some angular being that squatted as if with cold, long arms about bony knees, its small head staring upward. Funny, that, Hubbard scowled, remembering how he had carried it. For a statue of solid bronze, it had not weighed so much. Yet he was a strong man, over six feet in height. Perhaps he was even stronger than he thought.

He swore softly, staring at the eyes.

They looked at him, unwinking: ORBS OF PURE CRYSTAL!

"Can you see me?" he asked suddenly.

"I see you. You are—man! A thought had come to me that there were no more men. Are there other men, besides you?"

"Millions. I—but how can you



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speak? I didn't see your lips move at all."

"I am speaking with my mind. Many Ikorians can do that. I will tell you all about me, later."

Hubbard drew a deep breath. His great chest bulged the tan flannel shirt he wore. He rubbed his hands on his riding breeches, fighting his thoughts.

"Do you mean to tell me that you're—alive?"

"Alive? Of course I'm alive. That seems strange to you, naturally. It has been long since this shell of mine was—flesh. Come, help me. This wrapping about me, this bronze material—it was just sprayed on. It will rip off easily. Free me!"

Hubbard found the thing spoke truth. The metal was thin, and crumbly with unguessable age. It came to pieces, like brittle candy, in his fingers. He tore it loose, dropping it in tiny shards at his feet. He worked swiftly, with powerful hands. The last bit of lacquer fluttered to the floor.

The statue moved; stood up, slowly stretching.

It was a figure of gleaming crystal that stood before him. The lamplight glittered back from its polished surfaces, from the facets that gleamed and sparkled, casting off brilliant rays that nearly blinded.

Hubbard did not believe the credence of his eyes.

He opened them further, staring.

This man—this statue—this thing was made of—*diamonds!*

Little diamonds, big diamonds, all held together by some strange magnetic attraction: forming a human-shaped body on two legs, with two arms and an angular knob for a head. But this jewel-thing was exquisite! For Hubbard saw prisms within prisms, flawless squares and pointed pyramids, cones and cubes of solid diamonds, clusters of glittering jewels: multi-formed, bright with imprisoned reds and blues and vivid whites that gleamed and coruscated, pulsating with inner life!

The statue moved about the tent, examining everything curiously. It lifted bronze images and urns, setting them down as it had found them. Sadly, Hubbard thought.

The thing caught Hubbard staring at it.

"I amaze you. You are astounded. But—why?"

Hubbard laughed softly, rebuckling his holster strap. No use bullets against a being made of solid diamonds!

"I was thinking that body of yours as worth a powerful lot of money. It's as if a miser found a trunkload of his gold talking to him. After all—I did unbury you. Why, you're a walking Kimberly mine, and then some!"

"Oh. You mean this shell of mine is valuable to you. You could use it to get things you desire."

Hubbard chuckled.

"I could, but that doesn't bother me. I have more money than I know what to do with. It's just the sheer, utter—fantasy!—of the thing."

He laughed, enjoying the nonsense of the situation. The statue listened, frozen; listened to his laughter, drinking it in as a musician might drink in melody after years of deafness.

It spoiled his laughter, that thing listening so. He scowled.

Thought seeped through his brain, searing it. God! I'm dreaming all this. I'm asleep over my desk, with one of those bronze pieces in my fingers. I'll wake up in a moment. It isn't real. How can a statue speak? How



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can a man live, encased in—diamonds?

"I am real. After all, diamond is pure—how would you name it?"

Hubbard felt his skin prickle, and the short hairs at the base of his neck rise in awe. Something was inside his brain, searching, exploring! Suddenly it released him, content.

"Yes. Carbon, pure carbon. And carbon is the stuff of life, the base of the living force in every living being."

Hubbard wiped his hands on his thighs.

"Who are you?" he almost snarled. He didn't like being treated like a laboratory guinea pig? "What are you? How in the name of all that's sane did you get—down there?" he nodded toward the dark hole of his excavation beyond the open flaps of his tent.

"My name is Tonal Tu. I am an Ikorian. I have been down in that dark hole for a long time. It must have been a long time. Let me see—"

The statue moved effortlessly to the tent opening: stood there, looking out over the vast waste of sand. After a while it lifted its head and stared at the stars. It made a brilliant image of countless colors and hues, reflected rays of light, the tints locked inside the glittering prisms of its body softly pulsing.

Hubbard came and stood beside it.

"They are different, the stars. I do not know them at all. And the earth! That is different, too. I remember teeming jungles, and a vast ocean, and green grass waving where we built our city. All gone. Gone into the dead past!"

The image looked at Hubbard suddenly.

"The Heart! The Heart of Light—I had almost forgotten. Is he here? Did you find the Glitterer in the cave?"

Hubbard looked blank, but felt the strong anxiety, the powerful fear that gripped this queer being. It was as if it did not dare contemplate losing something that was worth existence itself to it.

"No," he answered slowly. "I found nothing but those bronze bits and—you."

"We must go below, into that hole you dug. If we could, we could find the Heart of Light. I must find him. He is—everything I need. He could tell you about me, and whence I came. He knows everything, is all-powerful!"

Hubbard turned back to the tent, took down an oil lamp and lighted it. He ran questing fingers about the cartridge belt at his waist, making sure the greased cylinders were there. He strode into the night, holding the lamp by his knees, casting radiance ahead of him. By his side walked the statue.

They crouched to enter the little tunnel under the earth that Hubbard had re-inforced with wooden beams brought for that purpose in his big plane. It stretched back for many yards, into darkness. Into the tunnel they walked, until they came to a blank wall of earth.

"This is as far as I went," explained Hubbard. "I found you here, with those broken bits of metal scattered about. I think that at one time they held food and drink for you—in case you needed it."

The statue paid him no heed, but looked instead at the bare brown earthen wall. As Hubbard watched, startled, that soil began to melt away into wisps of brownish matter that evaporated swiftly in the hot, dry air. It smacked of wizardry, seeing the ground being eaten away like that, but Hub-



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bard was past the point of amazement. Dimly he thought of atomic power controlled by the electrical waves the brain emanates. A form of mental energy, poured by this jewel-thing into a force that ate its way through clumps of earth . . .

But he didn't think much, because at that moment the earthen wall was gone, and he was staring into a stygian gulf beyond. He crouched beside the statue on a shelf of rock that was part of a stone precipice bordering this abyss of eternal night. It was black, black out there: the utter ebon of solid darkness.

"I can't see a thing," muttered Hubbard, seeing the statue kneeling, and looking down. "Can you?"

"Quiet I am casting my thoughts . . ."

Hubbard knelt silent, waiting. Furtively he loosened his revolver, taking no chances.

His breath caught in his throat—

A light flicked far below! It grew slowly, that light, glowing from somewhere far within that mighty jet emptiness. It shone dully at first, then grew brighter, blue and brilliant. It pulsed and quivered in bands of blue-white rays that billowed out from some hidden core hidden deep beneath them. It danced and beamed like a live thing, gaily swaying and beating, sentient.

Almost Hubbard could feel its—*joy*.

And as that light grew brighter, Hubbard saw the white roofs and towers, of a city, far below.

The statue stood erect on the lip of rock.

"Come. The Heart of Light still dwells in his temple. It is glad to see us. We must go to it!"

"That city," said Hubbard. "The sands of the desert should have covered it!"

Then he saw the dome of curving rocks above his head; rocks set flush to one another, forming a perfect hemisphere of solid stone that could have supported tremendous weight.

"The Ikorians built it long ago to protect their city from the mountains that were crumpling as this planet went through its maturing pangs," the statue said, and took him by the hand.

It stepped out into the abyss, putting a foot on a ray of the queer bluish light that was reaching to their rocky foothold.

"The light will bear you," it said.

Hubbard felt the amusement of the thing. It angered him, made him reckless. He stepped forward, felt solid matter beneath his feet, matter that bore him easily, without tremor. He stood on a beam of light that was shrinking, drawing back upon other curved beams of light that merged into it, and shrank in turn. It was an elevator of pure light! That, and more, for this light did not jerk and jump. It flowed smoothly and rhythmically, without a jar.

Down, down went the curved beam of light, to the floor of the great cavern.

Hubbard stepped out on smooth marble flagging that was strangely free of dust; looked about him, marveling. White stone buildings rose on all sides. Walls that curved, roofs that were perfect domes, towers that were needles of flawless granite glimmered ghostily in the blue radiance that bathed the city. It was an exquisite place. It filled the heart of an archaeologist, overflowed it with a lust to run from building to building, ex-



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ploring, hunting, searching—

"I am very anxious to see the Heart of Light," said the statue, looking at him, and Hubbard followed obediently.

They came to a large square where stood a small, lovely white tower. Hubbard sucked in his breath in awe. It was a temple. It shone white in the blue light, a white so stunning it seemed translucent, like a white jade vase of the Ch'ien Lung period of Ch'ing dynasty China, that Hubbard had once seen in the summer palace in Pekin. Great doors of carven gold were open, and on both sides of the doors square monoliths rose to glitter high above the square. From the opalescent dome of the building, around its perimeter, slim marble spears thrust their points.

"It's magnificent," Hubbard whispered.

"It is the shrine of Heart of Light."

Past the golden doors, up a curving flight of marble steps that shone beneath their feet strode Hubbard and the jewel-thing. Up past walls of a smooth coolness, to a level flooring—

"God!" whispered Hubbard.

A shining screen of opalescent hues and colors hung in midair, quivering and pulsing, alive. Within the lambent richness of its moving, restless chromatism were millions and millions of cones and cubes of moving jewels, weaving to and fro in eternal restlessness. Scarves of limpid tints flashed and glittered. Pencillings of light grew and richened within that living curtain interwoven, living, threads of coloration. Motes of brilliant starlings sparkled and oscillated.

Hubbard heard a faint tinkling, as gems might make if cast into a tiny whilrpool; heard joyful peals, a tinnabulation of gay and laughing purrings . . .

"Tonal Tu!"

"Heart of Light. Master of Ikor, and the planets of Ikor!"

The diamond statue leaped upward, was gathered within the living, pulsing, sparkling screen. The sussurrating tinklings spun faster, more abandoned, louder, seeming to call forth blessings from its rhapsody of sound.

Hubbard froze.

No longer diamond statue, no longer being of radiant colors—

Instead a—*woman!*

Hubbard choked, awed. Tonal Tu stood naked in the quivering screen smiling down at him. A woman was Tonal Tu, radiantly beautiful! Her rich red hair hung to her waist, her slant green eyes looked forth from long and curling lashes. Her mouth was scarlet, full and moist. Her body was pearly, creamy; touched with crimson.

She hung suspended in the living curtain, gazing down at him. She laughed, and Hubbard heard rich music.

"I too can—laugh!"

The screen pulsed suddenly, angrily. It seemed aware of Hubbard for the first time. It looked down upon him, questioningly; stretched out tendrils of light to his face. The light entered into his brain, probed it clean, as Tonal Tu had probed.

Hubbard quivered with the forces that were within him. Alien they were, and strong. Oh, so strong—*godlike.* They searched his soul as he stood there, not daring to move. He felt no rage. This—this being was beyond that.

The light released him, flowed back within the screen.

"Is this a being of outer Earth, daughter?" said the Heart, Its voice was filled with supernal majesty.



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calmly powerful.

"Yes, Heart of Light. He found me above, in the bronze sheath you put me in, to escape the—*them!* He removed the sheath, and I brought him here. I had to find you to learn—"

The curtain grew scarlet, raging. It threw sparks and showers of glowing crimson lights.

"Too late, too late. I was too late. I came, but not in time, O my handmaiden. *They* had come, and when they went away, there were none left. None!"

Hubbard was aware that the Light knew a profound sorrow. It beat against him, and tinted the hues of the screen a pale purple.

"All those who came from Ikor to find shelter here—gone in a way I tremble to think of. Taken by them who dwell in the black pits so very far below."

The Heart grew red, deep crimson. It billowed and surged and rippled. The music of its billions of gems was fiery, hating, ired!

"Ahh, but they have paid. Many have I slain in the eons I remained here, on guard. Many, many—but not enough! There are more. I must destroy them all—or seal forever their stenching pits."

Tonal Tu brushed back a strand of her red hair, smiling down at Hubbard.

"We could help you, Master—the Earth man and I."

Hubbard grinned suddenly. He was on familiar ground. He scented a fight. His hand touched the revolver, fell away. He felt the interest of the screen turning on him.

"The Earthman loves to fight, daughter. See how his hand brushes his weapon. He likes you, too, daughter."

Hubbard caught the undertone of gentle amusement. He heard Tonal Tu gasp, and saw her cheeks flame red. He laughed aloud. He liked this Heart of Light.

"He likes me, too. Now that is a strange thing, for I have never sought the affections of these Earth beings. I have been too busy—slaying!"

"I sense the humanity in you, Heart. You are not human as I know humanity, but you do understand emotions: love, and sorrow, and hate. I would like to help, if I could. I could get more weapons. Machine-guns, grenades, rifles, poison gas—"

The Glitterer put forth a thin stream of light, touched a block of metal that stood in a corner. The light covered the block, flickering lightly over it, and was gone.

The metal block, too, was—gone!

"Have you weapons to match that, Earth being? Nay, fret not. I was but boasting. I can boast to no one, these days. And I always did enjoy a good boast. Still—I may use you yet. There may be a way.

"Leave me for a while, you and Tonal Tu . . ."

The voice halted. Hubbard knew it had detected his thought. It laughed, shouted rich with mirth.

"Tonal Tu, he wants you as you are! Not with diamonds all over you, in you, part of you. He wants no statue, this man!"

The laughter again boomed forth, joyous; heedless of Tonal Tu's flush, of Hubbard's embarrassment. It was—no, not annoying, having your thoughts read by this Being. Say rather, pleasantly confusing.



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"Oh, I'll let her go as she is, Hubbard. The diamonds you saw, the hard statue was *me*. My force, my essence all about her, shielding her from *them*. She is young, Hubbard, younger than you. Only her mind is old, but that is because my mind was part of her mind, with her throughout her eon-long wait, comforting."

Hubbard wondered a moment, and the curtain spoke again.

"Then. You think of what they are, eh? You know. You have read of them. Certain writers of your upper crust: men like Lovecraft, Derleth—they came very close to guessing. How they imagined, I know not, but they—guessed! Eternal - evil, dwelling just without the earth, under it, in the caverns of its seas . . .

"But enough—"

The Heart pushed Tonal Tu forth, wisped about her figure for an instant, hung about her a shimmering gown of light that hardened to a metallic cloth that hung close at hip and breast, and flowed down the shapeliness of her legs.

Tonal Tu stood beside Hubbard, gowned magnificently.

"Go now, and leave me with my thoughts. I must think on how we will entrap them."

Hubbard took her hand in his, found it soft and white, tenderly smooth. Her green eyes stared back into his, and her crimson mouth quivered into a smile. They laughed, and started for the stairs.

The brilliant Heart of Light pulsed once, radiantly; then stilled, withdrew within itself.

On the flagging of the great square, Hubbard turned to the girl.

"What was he? How magnificent, how awesome!"

"He is the Heart of Light. He has always been. He came to my people on the planet Ikor ages ago, and dwelt among them. But I cannot explain him. He is light, and his jewels are the stuff of life, and contain the rich power of color. Legend says he was born on a fiery sun, a sun that was—*intelligent!* He may be a part of that sun, a part that is endowed with life and motion. I do not know."

She smiled up at him as they walked.

"Do you truly—like me Hubbard?"

He grinned and pressed her arm, drew her close to him.

"I love you, Tonal Tu," he said slowly. "I've never been much of a man for the ladies. I don't know just how to put these things into words, but—I know I couldn't live without you."

"I'm glad. I—need you, too!"

"You are strange, different," he murmured. "You are alien in some ways. But when I saw you there in that shimmering screen—I knew."

They crossed the square together wandering. Tonal Tu stopped suddenly, looking up at him.

"You would like to know about me wouldn't you, Hubbard? About my people, the planet from which my race came to Earth. Come, I will show you, while *he* ponders—"

Hubbard laughed softly as they went forward. It was almost like going to meet his best girl's folks—only how utterly different! He was to see people dead before Cro-Magnon man hunted his first meal! Her people, his—his in-laws! He laughed, telling her. Tonal Tu laughed, and Hubbard knew she understood, somehow. It drew her closer.

They passed into a huge building,



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past open metal doors. Mighty instruments stood in the vast hallway as it stretched back away from them. Tall bronze engines that served some forgotten purpose, small ships carved from some rare red metal, knobbed and levered machines, wired things with copper discs caught Hubbard's eyes. They stretched along, row on row, fathomless, dead, relics of a majestic past.

"This is the museum of Ikora," said Tonal Tu. "Here my people placed various engines that they used in trade and war. I know not their use. Perhaps you can detect their purpose."

But Hubbard would not even hazard a guess. They were as utterly beyond his explanation as a description of a new color. He accepted them as they were, and was content. Tonal Tu drew him on.

They halted before a block of translucent metal that shimmered and gleamed with imprisoned lights. Tonal Tu stepped upon it, beckoned Hubbard to join her.

Light came pulsing up from the flat metal beneath their feet, came leaping in wisps and waves, flowing all about them. And where the light was—empty space! The room grew hazy, fading...

Now Hubbard saw figures all about him; saw men in stately halls and noble homes, men with worried frowns, with care and a bleak despair etched on their brows. Men of the planet Ikor of some ancient, distant galaxy, men who faced destruction from the cold that seeped on them from space as their thin girdle of atmosphere was slowly oozing forth.

The men and women gathered and spoke, and went together to a great white temple wherein dwelt the Heart of Light. Him they woke from his eternal slumberings, sought his aid. One way only was left to them: to traverse space itself to another planet. Only light could pass through the cosmic cold, yet the Heart was light itself! He could transfer them, a small part of their population. Their lot it was to pick and choose. He would find the planet, and bring them in his jewelled warmth across the void. Came the day when the men and women entered into the Heart, merged into particles of light, small molecules of radiant glory, travelled interstellar space at tremendous speed. From his vast, fathomless power, the Heart fed them, warmed them, kept them in a comatose hibernation.

They arrived on a young Earth where teeming jungles swelled with life, and heaving oceans battered craggy shores. Gigantic reptiles fought and mated on this planet. It was young: spawning, lush with tropic vegetation, alive with a strength that was indulging in its first experiments. Here would the people of Ikor grow and thrive!

They built their white city with the Heart of Light's aid. They walled out the too voracious dinosaurs. They lived and died here, amid new scenes, amid this fresh and glorious world. Here was new hope, new life. The Heart of Light went back to Ikor, to transplant others. Everything was perfect—

The blight struck!

Hubbard knew utter horror, seeing what came crawling up from beneath the earth that night. Oozing white stuff, with the look of the long buried dead: bulging strangely, fish-belly white, swollen in monstrous ways. Men



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went mad that night. Death and horror ran amok in this white city, as mankind fought and writhed and died horribly. Screams of agony and despair, of barren hopelessness, were the only sounds in the city.

When dawn came, there were not many left.

Those that remained were frozen with a nameless dread. They watched the sky for the Glitterer's return.

He came at last, and with him more Ikorians. When he learned what had transpired, the Heart of Light raged, and gleamed with fiery crimson hues. He sought out the horrors, but they had powers, too—borrowed from those outside, whom they served and worshipped with nameless rites and blasphemies. Not into their infernal pits could the Light go. He had to wait for them, and they were patient. So patient!

Among the first born on Earth was a little girl, a girl with red hair and dancing green eyes. Hubbard watched her grow, loving her even then. He saw the Heart of Light with her, speaking to her, teaching, instructing. She was beloved of the Heart of Light, his daughter.

When she was twenty, the Glitterer had to cross the void. The people on frozen Ikor needed him. But first he drew Tonal Tu within his brilliant colors, among his clashing jewels turning her body into light, and imprisoning that light within the diamonds that were part of his own essence. He coated her with bronze, and left her hidden.

That night the Heart of Light went back to Ikor.

That night *they* oozed up from below.

There were none left, then. Only—Tonal Tu survived the horror!

The light faded, grew dim. Hubbard looked at the softly weeping girl; put his tanned arm about her, drew her close.

"The Heart of Light found Ikor a world of ice," she sobbed softly. "None lived on it! When he returned here, he found an empty city. He thought me gone, too. He vowed vengeance. He struck again and again as *they* came up: slaying, slaying.

"But death never brought life. My people—all gone!"

Her lips were close. Hubbard bent to kiss them, felt them quiver in response, felt her strain close—

Her eyes widened, filling with stark horror, staring past him. Hubbard dropped hand to gun, whirling—

*They* were here, in the museum!

They moved slowly across the marble floor: squat white masses of gelatinous flesh, with membranous tentacles stretching forth over the flagging, shifting, moving, dragging them forward, leaving a trail of slime behind. Long strands of cilia hung from their heaving mottled masses; shreds of flabby flesh, limp and evil in the still air.

There were many of them. They came pulping in through door and window, flowing forward ceaselessly. From the pits they had come, drawn by the scent of humankind, exposing their flaccid bodies to the dim light—bodies that only eternal darkness could bear to look upon. From under drooping folds of flesh, reddened eyes glared forth. Eyes that were vacant and dull, eyes that gleamed with evil hunger, eyes that could madden—gloated upon their prey!

Tonal Tu shook against Hubbard. Her breath choked in her throat.

"They have come—"



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Hubbard swore and yanked his gun from its holster, fired. The bullets bit in, sank and lost themselves in that striated, rubbery white flesh. The things came on, unhurried.

"No use," whimpered Tonal Tu, shuddering. "We are cut off. The Heart is dreaming. He does not know."

Hubbard snarled low in his throat, caught the girl and lifted her high on his chest. He sprang upward from the translucent metal, reaching for a bronze lampchain. He caught it, drew himself and Tonal Tu upwards to hang for a moment.

"We can't fight them," he said savagely. "Bullets they seem to eat. But—but if that stone block is what I think it is—some substance indigenous to the Heart of Light, it will warn him they are here! I think we saw his thoughts a while ago, transmitted through that metal that holds the lights."

But the white monstrosities shied from the metal block. They seemed to know, too. They could wait, for they were patient. The muscles of a man's arms will not bear his and another's weight on a bronze chain forever—even the muscles of a man like Hubbard.

Even so, there were some who would not wait. They went to the walls, began to slither up them, toward the ceiling, from which they could drop down along the chain—

Hubbard hooked a leg among the links, easing Tonal Tu over to one hip. He lifted his revolver and aimed it. It belched flame.

The bullet hit the block of shimmering metal.

It clanged aloud, and for one swift instant flared brilliant red, then grew dull, spiritless and lifeless once again.

Hubbard grinned.

"He knows. He is awake. The bullet roused him!"

But the air did not grow bright with the radiant lights of the Heart. It remained dull, dim. Hubbard felt ice at his heart. Had he failed? Did the Heart still slumber on, pondering, thinking them safe?

Hubbard heard dull thunder. The walls of the building quivered almost imperceptibly. The chain swayed, swinging its human weights to and fro. The noise came slowly, muffled: and the earth, hearing it, quaked.

They heard it too. Their flaccid feelers lifted to sway in puzzlement, curious, somewhat—fearful. They covered the whole floor now, a vast sea of pulpy flesh, dappled and noisome. They hung from the walls and the ceiling, clutching their smooth sides with their fetid tentacles.

"What—was—that?" whispered Tonal Tu, her green eyes wide and frightened.

"Sounded like an earthquake. But far away. Distant. It won't help us—"

The mottled things were moving now, away from the building, out of it into the dead streets. They flowed swiftly and Hubbard heard an alarmed chittering, a piercing squaking as they called and shrilled to one another: questioning, curious. They seemed vaguely disturbed, as though aware of some terrible catastrophe. They went rapidly, scurrying . . .

"They can travel when they want to," muttered Hubbard, dropping to the floor and setting Tonal Tu on her feet. "Wonder what set them off?"

A moon window was pierced through the west wall of the museum.



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Hubbard and Tonal Tu went to stand there staring out. The streets outside were white with the squamous horrors. From building-wall to building-wall they formed a great torrent of oozing, slithering flesh.

"There are thousands of them," he said. "They fill the entire city. They must have thought more Ikorians had come from space—"

"Hubbard! The temple. It glows, it brightens!"

The shrine was flaring with a mad potpourri of colored light that lifted from its transparent dome. The light surged upward, glaring crimson, angry red, raging scarlet. It blooded the city in vermillion, like a mad moon. Shot with white and green and yellow, that mighty red tongue of light danced in frenzy, rearing upward above the temple, filling the abyss above the city!

"They have seen the light. Listen!"

A babel of shrill titters and sobbing squeals rose from the massed ranks in the streets. It was sound, alive with bleak despair, a keening wail of hopelessness. The sound welled, grew in volume.

The things began to pour along the streets, seeking to escape.

"Hubbard, Hubbard," screamed Tonal Tu, pointing. "The harbor—where they emerged from their pits—gone!"

It was true. Where once the ships of the Ikorians had plied the young oceans of Earth, where the stone quays and wharfs jutted out, where had stood an ancient, blackened harbor filled with mud—was crumpled slag and cinders!

"He closed it while we thought he slept! Your bullet did arouse him. He knew. The light about the museum whispered to him. He went at once to their entrance in the harbor, sealed it, knowing they were with us, trapped above it!"

The Light was pulsing savagely, glowing red and enflamed, hovering over the city. It whispered its hate and vengeance in wild tinklings of clanging jewels, arrogant, boastful. It whispered of hate and death and utter extinction; whispered and—*struck!*

From the great screen of colors in the gulf above darted red flame—crimson light that spun downwards at terrific speed. It laved itself about the chittering white pulps that heaved and squirmed, bathing them in scarlet hues, roving over them, torturing with light, with the pure incandescence of a billion red lumens!

Hubbard and Tonal Tu watched from their window, awed.

Here and there sped the Light, devouring. Where it had been, was now black pools of liquid that bubbled once ot twice, then seeped between the cracked flaggings to merge with the soil of earth. Like animate red hammers, the light poised and hit! And the white things died by the hundreds, squealing.

How long they stood by the window, Hubbard will never know. But when it was over he sighed; and beside him Tonal Tu sighed also, sadly.

"He will not stay here now. There is no cause. He has trapped them at last.

Hubbard held her close, wondering, saying, "But you—?"

A beam of light dipped toward them, gathered them up. It lifted them out of the window and toward the temple. Once again they stood before the Heart of Light.



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"It was good, that slaying," the Light said. "I waited a long time for it. Now I am content.

"You, Hubbard—you are wondering what I am, from whence I draw my power. I am light, pure light. I am a tiny sun, in many respects. I am intelligent and I have power. Yes, pure light has power! Your scientists know that dimly. They have tested a beam of light in a vacuum, and found that it will move a strip of metal foil. That knowledge I drew from you.

"But your arts and sciences are so young, so undeveloped. Hubbard! Not far along the right paths have you humans progressed. Still—they will discover that light can nauseate, light can kill. Why is man the only mammal with a sense of color? For a reason, as they shall learn. Cold light is still a dream of your scientists; black light, but recently discovered.

"Yes, Hubbard, light is very powerful. It contains the stuff of life. It can cause an animal to breed twice where it only bred once before; it can make an animal grow its winter coat, though it be summer. It can effect seasonal changes in the wrong seasons! The life essence is—light!

"If light can create, it can also—destroy!"

The curtain quivered, glittered, waxed boastful. It quieted.

"Come, Tonal Tu. My time grows short. I hunger for the cool stretches of space out there among the stars. I want to see things, for I have been long a self-made prisoner, here in Ikora."

The Heart of Light lifted Tonal Tu within its pulsing radiance, caressing, making joyful tinklings with its myriad jewels. It peered down at Hubbard.

"You will take her with you, Hubbard. I can tell that. Guard her well! For she will be no part of *me* this time. She will be a normal maid of Ikora, twenty years of age. You will have to teach, to educate her. But it should prove a pleasant tutelage."

The Heart cast Tonal Tu forth, placed her beside Hubbard.

"Go forth, my children. Go up to outer Earth. Raise strong children. In their veins will flow the ancient Ikorian blood. Perhaps their olden knowledge, too, will bloom. If you ever need me—"

A tendril of light flashed out, played over Tonal Tu's hand, moving, forming metal, and placing diamond within it.

"Go . . ."

Hubbard calls her Toni today. He worships her, of course. Those of his friends who know her beauty find it exquisite, if slightly alien. But she and Hubbard keep to themselves most of the time. They plan a trip back to Australia. They have a date, they say.

Toni Hubbard does not wear jewelry, except for a curiously wrought ring. It contains a large diamond. Lapidaries claim it is the most unusual gem they have ever studied. In it sparkles a tiny, bluish flame, alive.

They do not know, naturally.

It is the bridge to the Heart of Light.

The End



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# THE GREAT STEEL PANIC

## FLETCHER PRATT and IRVIN LESTER

**Illustrated by FRANK R. PAUL**

*Terror strikes New York City as the supporting cables of the Brooklyn Bridge are cut one by one and subway wrecks kill and maim. Only one man has a clue to the secret saboteur . . .*

WALTER Weyl, AB, AM, BSc, consulting biologist to the New York Police Department, snapped his microscope case shut with a weary sigh. The day, which he had planned to spend in the study of a particularly fascinating group of bryozoans from the Azores, was practically ruined.

"Tell him all right," he said to his laboratory assistant, who was waiting, telephone in hand. "I'll be there in an hour. I suppose somebody thinks he has found a new kind of cootie running around the Tombs without leash or muzzle."

"Why don't you chuck it up?" asked Merrick, the assistant, when he had delivered the message. "You're too big for this minor bug hunting."

"Never can tell," said Weyl, "might be more rats. And Hert's a good fellow and a friend of mine."

He was referring to the incident which had led to his appointment as consulting biologist to a Department which would seem to need anything but biologists, the extraordinary plague of giant rats which had infected the new municipal tenements and which he had curbed in a manner that brought him an international reputation, his appointment and the fast friendship of Deputy Commissioner Hert.

As Weyl left the house he noted a discarded newspaper on the cellar grating. "BROOKLYN BRIDGE WOBBLES" the headline announced, and mildly interested, he stirred it with his toe to glance at what was below. He noted abstractedly that in the place left vacant when the sheet was moved there were two jagged, irregular cuts made through the steel bars, as though they had been sawn by an inexperienced hand, and went on to Hert's office, his mind still on the bryozoans.

"I know what it is," he offered, as he dropped into the leather-covered chair by that dignitary's desk. "You're going to tell me that it isn't exactly in my line, but for goodness' sake, find out whether Mrs. Chandler-Chandler de Poketbroke's pet Pom-


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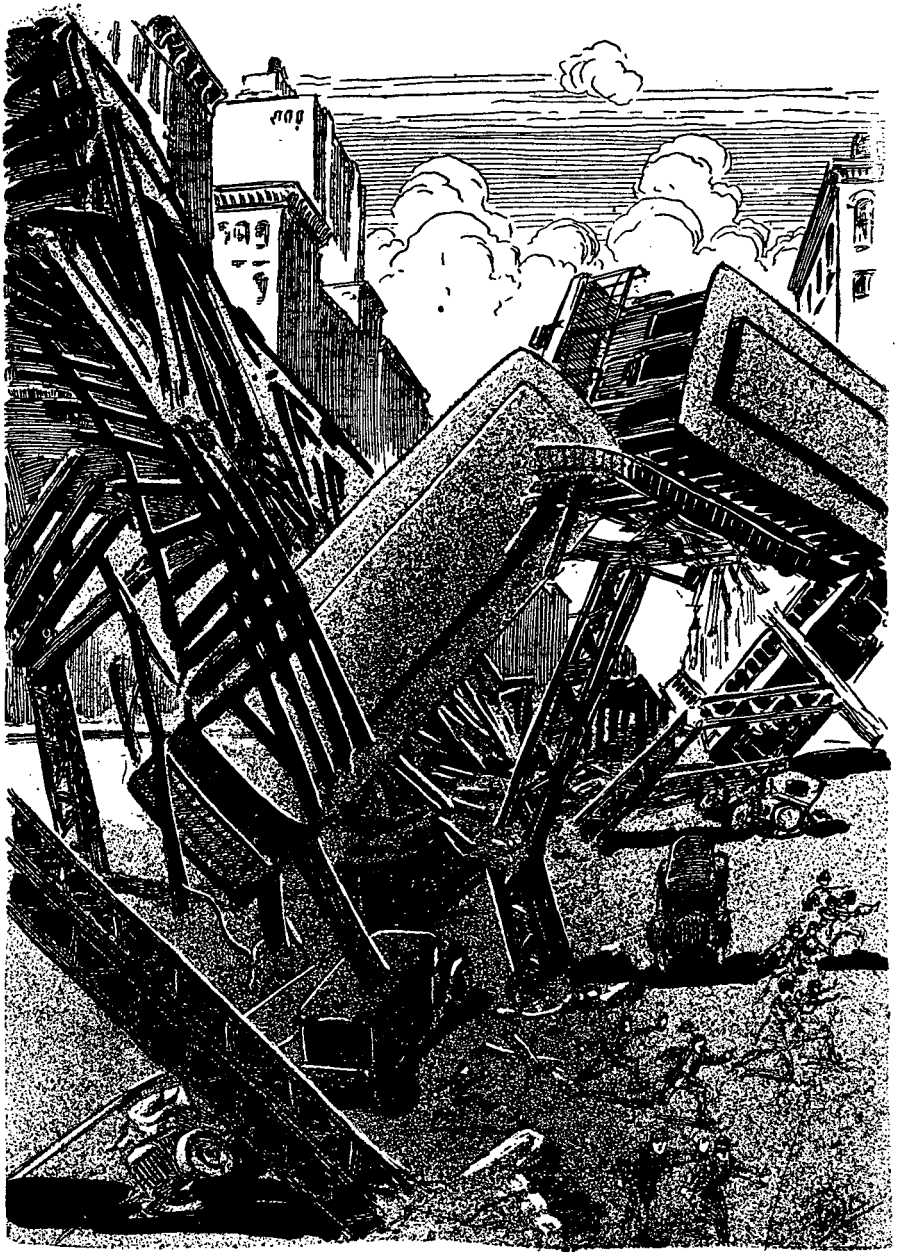



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eranian died of poison or of the blind staggers."

"Only fifty percent on that one," said the Commissioner with a grin. "It isn't exactly in your line, maybe, but it's a really good one this time—almost as good as the rats. Here's the story:

"You know Brooklyn Bridge is constantly being painted by a crew which goes over it from one year's end to another, every cable and wire rope getting its coat of paint once a year. Well, about three or four weeks ago one of the painters reported that a small wire cable, way high up, had parted. A new one was fitted, but the next day there were a couple more missing, and this was followed by a regular series of reports of parted wire cables, always small ones.

"The Department of Plants and Structures, which has the bridge in charge, began to get worried, and sent an engineer down to make an examination. He reported that the bridge was good for another three centuries, and that there was no reason in the world for the parting of the cables unless careless painting had admitted some moisture and they had rusted through.

"That was about two weeks ago. Right after his report, the cables began to go in increasing quantities and when Plants and Structures ordered another examination, they found that in every case the cables had been cut. Then they came to us. There are policemen on duty at each end of the bridge all the time, who should have noted anything unusual, but I put an extra detail on. It looked like the work of a maniac or some superior bit of Boshevik frightfulness. You remember the bombs in the subway?

"But the cables kept going in spite of our extra detail. Night before last, I threw a regular cordon of police around each end of the bridge with orders to stop all suspicious persons and placed plainclothes men on all the footpaths. Yesterday morning there were more cables missing and one of those big main supporting cables over a foot in thickness, was nearly cut through in two places—and not one of the police had seen a thing! Moreover the cuts were so far up that they couldn't have been reached from the bridge floor, without the cutter climbing high up and being sharply outlined against the light we had on the place.

"Naturally, we had to close the bridge to traffic. We haven't been able to accomplish a thing; the papers have got hold of it, and I'll admit, it has me worried."

Weyl gave a low whistle. "Looks as though someone had made himself invisible and were giving a demonstration," he said, "but I fancy it's simpler than that. How about the painters? Have you thought of one of them introducing some sort of slow-acting acid either into his paint or on the cables direct? I'll grant I don't know of any acid that would act that way, but that's no reason there couldn't be one."

"Yes, we thought of the painters, too. The gang only consists of ten men. We have had every one of them under surveillance since Plants and Structures complained to us, but nothing serious has come of it.

"And that isn't all. I've looked at the ends of the severed cables. They have been cut with a regular hacksaw; no rust, edges sharp and bright. But



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the funniest part of the whole business turned up this morning just before I called you up. You know they're tearing down the old post office building opposite the City Hall. The masonry is mostly gone from the upper stories and they are getting ready to tackle the steel. Well, this morning Plants and Structures, which has this in charge also, as it's city property, came in with a report that some of the steel beams have been sawed through just like the Brooklyn Bridge cables. It seems like a senseless piece of vandalism."

The scientist was silent for a moment, tapping his fingers on the desk. "Tell you what I want you to do," said he, "get me samples of mild bar steel, structural steel, and any other kind of steel you happen to think about and of cast iron and send them over to the laboratory. I'll see if I can find what did it. Send small samples, please."

"Want one of the bridge cables?"

"No-o-o. Wouldn't have room for it in the house."

Weyl reached the street in time to find that the latest sensation, an elevator accident in the Municipal Building in which several people had been killed, was already eclipsing the threatened collapse of the great bridge, and reflected that elevator cables are also made of steel wire, as he made his way to his laboratory.

"Why do people saw other people's cellar gratings, Merrick?" Weyl asked his assistant as he arranged and ticketed the samples of steel which had been brought in by a policeman.

"To burgle their houses, I suppose," answered the young man.

"But if there is nothing in the house worth burgling? And if the grating is only part cut through? And if nobody could possible get through even if it were all cut through? And why should anyone want to burgle the Brooklyn Bridge? Hert thinks its radicals, but Hert sees red flannel bogies under every bush. It's all so like 'Alice in Wonderland,'" murmured the scientist. "Suppose you possess yourself of a hacksaw and get me one of the bars that somebody has been chewing on out in front."

In a few minutes the young man was back. "Look," said Weyl. "Whoever cut this must have been a very inexperienced hand. The edges are irregular. And see these fine starred lines running up the bar. It's almost as though the iron were brittle like glass and someone had smashed it."

"Chemicals?" inquired Merrick.

"I doubt it—but to be on the safe side, you had better take this end of it and analyze for corrosive acids, especially the halogens. You needn't bother about the oxidizing agents. There seems to be no trace of rust. You might try the spectroscope, too. But I have a peculiar idea—"

With this indefinite statement he handed Merrick one end of the broken bar and drawing on a pair of surgical gloves began to treat the other in a manner that would have astonished any metallurgist.

With a fine file, he rasped off a little pile of filings from the sawn end of the bar. A pinch of these was placed on each of the samples sent him by Commissioner Hert, and each sample was placed on a little porcelain dish and put into the temperature regulator where germ cultures were



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usually grown. A small pinch of the filings remained. This was carefully divided into three parts, and each part mounted on a separate microscope slide. One was treated to a bath in haemotoxylin stain, a second to Wright and Semple's stain and a third, left as it was, was slipped into the microphotographing apparatus.

The summer sun went down and the lights were turned on as Weyl worked over his slides, making adjustments here, comparisons with voluminous notebooks and works of reference there, and now and again filing off another tiny sample from a bar of the damaged cellar grating for further examination. Half a dozen microphotographic negatives were drying on the rack, the big X-ray machine was purring softly over another sample and the clock was registering 3:30 when Merrick came in to find his chief with something like a smile of satisfaction on his face.

"What did you get?" asked Weyl.

"No halogens," was the reply. "I got a tiny trace of phosphoric acid on one analysis, but it may have been a mistake. Spectroscope shows strong carbon lines though; seems to be a higher carbon steel than I had supposed. Shall I carry on?"

"In the morning," said Weyl with a yawn. "I think I've got it, but I want confirmatory chemical evidence. You had better make quantitative analyses of samples from the cut end and from the other end of the bar, giving special attention to the carbon content. Let's go to bed."

They were awakened in the morning by the ringing of the telephone. It was Hert again, anxious and excited.

"I suppose I needn't tell you to use all possible haste in your work," he said. "This thing is getting out of hand. An elevator in the Municipal Building fell yesterday and several people were killed."

"Yes, I saw the paper," said Weyl.

"But the inspector who examined it said that both the ordinary lifting cable and the emergency cable had been cut nearly through with a saw, ready to fall at the first strain. The power cable snapped when the others went. We raided all known radical haunts last night and have every available man working on the case, but we can't prove anything till we know how these devils did it. Have you hit on anything yet?"

"A little," said Weyl. "Forget about the Bolsheviks. Hert. They're not to blame."

"But I got an anonymous letter saying Sacco and Vanzetti were avenged. What makes you think it isn't the radicals? What can we do?"

"Well, you might give the other elevators in the Municipal Building a bath in carbolic acid," said Weyl, and hung up while the commissioner was still begging him to be serious.

New York—and the world—will long remember that day as the beginning of a grim reign of terror. It was about half-past nine in the morning when Hert called Weyl up, and some millions of New Yorkers, perusing their morning papers were pleased to learn that the anarchistic radicals who had systematically weakened the Brooklyn Bridge and sent people to their deaths in Municipal Building elevators had been caught in the general round-up



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of hard cases and were now cooling their heels in the Tombs, where they would be confronted with the anonymous letter one of them had written to Deputy Police Commissioner Hert.

But by noon the disquieting tidings that saw-cuts had appeared in cables of the Manhattan Bridge leaked out somehow, and an hour later came the first of those really serious catastrophies that shook the great city in the next week—a terrible subway wreck due to a broken—or cut—rail that had precipitated the speeding train from the tracks and crushed it against the stone walls of its tunnel, with an appalling loss of life.

Nobody thought of connecting the unusual number of auto smashes due to the failure of some essential part (all, like the previous occurrences, in the down town district) with this, or with the singular accident in which a man was injured when an iron electric light standard suddenly toppled over on him.

Police reserves were mobilized for duty and vacations cancelled as in times of extreme emergency, but even police reserves, it seemed could not prevent the sudden collapse of a surface car on lower Broadway early the next morning, or a second subway wreck that afternoon. And when the towering steel pinnacle of a new thirty-story skyscraper on Nassau Street swayed gently and then came thundering down into the narrow traffic-crowded thoroughfare, carying with it in its fall a smaller building, and spreading death and destruction, something like a panic began to appear. That evening, too, the *New York World* failed to appear for the first time in its history, and hastily run single sheets carried an explanation that due to serious breakdowns in the great presses, it had been impossible to print the paper.

The next day—the third from the radical round-up and Hert's telephone call to Weyl—the *New York American* joined the *World* in silence. Two more elevator falls were reported, and the whole elevator system of several skyscrapers was declared unsafe upon inspection. Subway trains were running dead slow throughout the city; traffic was paralyzed. The police, driven frantic, were wringing confessions obviously false from the jailed radicals under the impetus of a growing popular clamor for finding the culprits—and that the growing terror should lack no element of horror, a large section of the Third Avenue Elevated came crashing to the street, bearing with it a train loaded with passengers.

Repeated telephone calls from Commissioner Hert had been answered by Merrick with the information that Weyl was "out" until the final one brought the information that "The line has been temporarily disconnected" from Central. The scientist, in truth, had abandoned his laboratory work on the second day, satisfied with the result, and had gone to poke about lower New York examining the wreckage left by the growing list of catastrophes. What he saw seemed to satisfy him, for he had returned to his office with a more cheerful expression than he had worn for many days and that night an observer would have seen his window lighted till near dawn.

The morning of the fifth day of



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the reign of terror, counting from the fall of the Municipal Building elevator, brought with it further tidings of disorganization and wreckage. An outside fire escape on a crazy old building in Chinatown had slid to the street, burying half a dozen people in the wreckage. The elevated roads, after a second collapse, had been declared unsafe and had ceased operations. The intelligence of a track-walker had averted another subway wreck by the discovery of a rail neatly cut in two.

But the morning also brought with it some feeling of relief to the harassed Police Commissioner, in the shape of a telephone call from Weyl, asking him to come to the laboratory and bring with him the executives of several leading electrical firms. "Appeal to them," said the scientist. "Tell them they are the only men who can save the situation. I'll explain why and how when you bring them."

Commissioner Hert sat not too comfortably on the edge of a laboratory table, on which were displayed a row of the samples of iron and steel sent to Weyl, together with the compound microscope and a sheaf of microphotographs. Before him stood the biologist, like a showman displaying his wares, and in the five chairs the laboratory afforded were grouped the executives of as many electrical companies.

"You will pardon me," said Weyl, "if I seem long and discursive. I have found the criminal who has made all this trouble, but it is necessary to prove his guilt.

"I will start by reminding you that Commissioner Hert called me into the case in the matter of the Brooklyn Bridge. He believed that the cables had been severed by the radicals as an act of terrorism, but wanted me to find out how it was done.

"Now it at once struck me that if a human agency had been at work it was to say the least a very unusual human agency, for the bridge had been brilliantly lighted and under the care of a large number of trained observers when some of the cutting took place. A slow-acting acid either in the paint or applied to the cables was suggested, but the action of any acid would be revealed by a trace of its salts, and chemical analysis showed no such thing. Besides I had noted that morning that some of my own cellar-gratings had been cut in a similar peculiar fashion, and there was no reason whatever why any radicals should want to waste time on my coal-hole.

"So I had to hunt further afield. As the manifestations of this terror spread, several singular facts began to appear. In every case, the accident was due to the failure of some piece of iron or steel. The accidents were, in the beginning, confined to a comparatively narrow area around Brooklyn Bridge—hand me that map, will you, Merrick? Thank you. On this map of New York I have made a red dot at the scene of each of these steel failures. You see they are clustered thick around Brooklyn Bridge, and thin out gradually in all directions, except that there seems to be another small center here in Brooklyn.

"In every case the iron or steel that failed has been cut through—not in a clean, straight cut, but in a somewhat



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jagged fashion, and with lines radiating out from the cut almost as though the metal were brittle and had been shattered by the blow of some blunt and heavy cutting instrument.

"The failures were in all sorts and kinds of iron or steel, causing accidents that ranged from the terrible to the absurd. There were broken subway rails and broken typewriters; half-built skyscrapers collapsing and iron fences, like that around the City Hall, developing cuts. If this were due to any human agency, I argued, it was certainly the work of an insensate maniac.

"But maniacs, proverbially cunning though they are, could hardly have cut the cables on the Brooklyn Bridge while they were under observation or clambered up into elevator shafts to sever wire rope hanging in vacancy, many feet above the bottom of the shaft. This was conclusive to me of the unhuman agency of the phenomena. I hope it will be so to you as well.

"But I had one fact to go on. All the accidents took place in some place where the iron or steel was exposed to the air.

"Then I got a piece of steel from my cellar grating and set to work on it. The chemical analysis showed only a rather high percentage of carbon than usual, for which there was no adequate explanation. But the microscope gave me something. There are always a certain number of bacteria—germs—floating around in the air and resting on things. Filings from the cut place on the grating bar showed the normal bacteria, but also a large, a perfectly extraordinary number of hitherto uncatalogued type of bacteria, ladder-like in form and perfectly amazing in activity. If you will examine these microphotographs you will see some of them." He passed around the pictures amid an interested silence on the part of the electrical men and a fidgety silence on the part of Commissioner Hert.

"Could this cutting of steel, then, be due to bacterial action, I asked myself?" continued Weyl. "Every other fact fitted in with it. Bacteria could work without being seen on Brooklyn Bridge; bacteria could get into elevator shafts, bacteria would not care whether it was a typewriter or a skyscraper they were wrecking.

"It is perfectly true that iron and steel seem to be unusually hard and difficult objects for bacterial action, but then I began to remember the geological history of iron.

"As you know, bacterial activity has occurred in ore deposits in many parts of the earth. But how did bacteria get into these deposits? According to geologists, working in the light of modern biological science, the ore deposits are the work of algae and iron bacteria. In other words, there were, far back in geologic ages, bacteria—germs—which secreted and deposited iron oxide, just as the bacteria of disease secrete and deposit poisons.

"They lived on iron, in fact. Now this may appear peculiar, but it is not at all incredible when one considers that there are many animals in nature, which make short work of much harder substances. The whelk, to mention one, lives on oysters, which it extracts from boring through the extremely hard shell surrounding the bivalve. Some worms bore rock, and—well, I could multiply instances, but it would be unnecessary.



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"So for the time, I accepted the hypothesis that the steel was attacked by bacteria of this new type; in other words, was diseased, was sick. I set myself to prove it by experiment. From the diseased end of my cellar grating I took some filings and placed them on each of these samples of steel sent me by Commissioner Hert.

"That was five days ago. Look at them now." He pointed to the little blocks of steel, each on its porcelain dish. Each had melted as a lump of sugar melts when touced by water, some from the center, some from the edges, till hardly anything of them was left.

"If your policemen hadn't been so busy hunting for radicals, Hert," the scientist went on, "they would have noticed that after every break the broken steel kept on melting away from the point where the break occurred.

"Well, I had my criminal, or rather my disease. The next thing was to prescribe a remedy. Carbolic acid kills these bacteria as it does many others—I was perfectly serious when I told you to give the Municipal Building elevators a bath in it, Hert—but of course, it would be almost impossible to apply carbolic acid to all the infected places in the city. Moreover, while we were doing it, new centers would develop.

"These bacteria multiply very rapidly and spread with phenominal speed.

"Their action consists in uniting the iron with carbon dioxide and some material they secrete, forming a compound that is very soluble, and hence leaves the edge of the diseased steel with a bright appearance as the compound dissolves in a little moisture. Therefore the iron or steel they work on must have free access to the air (which contains a certain amount of carbon dioxide) for them to exist. I fancy that is the reason why we have not heard of any steel giving way, except where it is exposed. It would be terrible indeed, if all the steel in New York's skyscrapers were open to their attacks.

"During the past few days I have been working along the lines of excluding the steel from the air. No really satisfactory way presented itself. To give only one instance, the subway rails could not well be covered by any kind of protective coating.

"Then I observed something else. In the subway and elevated breakages, it was always the running rails and not the power rails that were attacked: in the elevator failures the supporting cables but not the power cables gave way; telephone cables were undamaged. It occurred to me that these bacteria found steel which was near to an electric current decidedly unhealthy.

"So I experimented again, first with high voltage and gradually with reduced voltage, and I found that not only do the bacteria not attack steel near to which an electric current is passing, but that even the mildest electrical shock is fatal to them. If you will come to the microscope—"

He attached a small dry cell to one of the dissolving steel samples with copper wire and placed it in the object piece of the big microscope, with a small switch breaking the circuit. "Now Hert—" said Weyl, and the police commissioner, looking through the glass, saw the metal swarming with a monstrous growth of ladder-like shapes that swam slowly.



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"Now I'm going to close the switch," said the scientist, and instantly the moving shapes were still.

In silence the electrical men followed him to the glass and saw the miracle repeated.

"Now I do not profess to know how these bacteria developed or how they got here. That is a subject for future investigation," said Weyl. "But I do know that civilization is faced with a terrible danger, and that you electrical men are the only ones who can save us. A current, no matter how weak, must be passed through every piece of exposed iron or steel in the city! It's up to you."

It was Howells of the New York Light & Power who was first on his feet, with the words that marked the beginning of the end of the terrible steel sickness and the accidents it had brought about. "Mr. Weyl and Commissioner Hert," he said, "our resources are at your disposal. One of the pleasures of being head of a large corporation is that one can take part in large movements."

The End

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(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4)

grants, I'm as interested as the next man in the ionosphere, and have long been fascinated by creeping and rupturing notches. I just think that while the Golden Pump is working, it ought to pump some in Mr. Matacia's direction. I am taking nothing away from the ionosphere or those diseased notches when I suggest that a *proven* device that saves lives under combat conditions ought to have some small investigation.

What does this have to do with fantasy and science fiction? A great deal. I will not venture to say that you will read it first in these pages. The school that holds by the ideals that SF is some form of prognostication is wrong. What I will say is that you will find the color and the excitement—and action—of life and of speculation in these pages. When the Russians, flea-bitten serfs a few decades ago, can drop machinery gently to the surface of Venus, while the foursquare, theoretically unimaginative Marines find land mines with old coat hangers—why anything goes. The world is a far stranger and exciting place than we have ever imagined.

The Editor

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(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 144)

"Twelve, anyway." he admitted tucking his shirt in. "Guess I've been working too hard."

"You need a vacation," I said.

"Damned right. Any suggestions?

Marshall said: "Peter and I are going fishing over the week-end. How about it?"

"Swell," Eric nodded. "Just like old times, huh?"

"Uh," I said. "And how about a steak right now?"

When we got out to the street, Marshall handed me the folded sheaf of papers. "Here's your junk back, Peter," he said. "I'm afraid I'll never appreciate the intricacies of viaduct engineering."

"The hell with it," I said, tearing it up and throwing the tiny pieces up in a miniature hail of confetti. "The hell with it!" The wind caught up the scattered bits of paper and blew them along before us.

Eric said: "This was a nice clean town before you got here."

The End



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# INCOMPATIBLE

## ROG PHILLIPS

Illustrated by TERRY

*Zadha was a one-woman alien invasion—with powers far beyond ours. And she had nasty eating habits. How can a being like this be defeated—or even better, used?*

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ZADHA Omo shut off the cutting torch and stood back while the smoking hot rectangular section of the shell plate fell inward, bounced off a bulkhead, and came to rest on a pile of debris in one corner of the crazily tilted compartment. It had landed on the carcass of one of the Zoiltos.

The stench of searing skin rose from the creature in steaming vapors, causing Zadha to wrinkle her nose in disgust. It was necessary, however, to wait until the hot edge of the opening cooled, before she could climb out of the wrecked ship; so she stood there, enduring the odor.

The Zoiltos, the hairless cattle upon which she had fed during her voyage of exploration, were dead. Dead, they were of no further use to her as food sources.

Leaning weakly against the bulkhead and closing her eyes, she "explored." There were many thought-foci within a radius of a mile or so. None of these were intelligent, and none of them seemed to be aware of the crash of the ship. But wait—some of them were aware, but seemed uncurious.

That puzzled her. They were neither afraid nor curious. Why? She searched back to a thought focus that had been easier to read than the others, that had been aware of the crash.

The answer came, finally. There were so many crashes. They were of ships, too; but a different kind of ship—one that apparently was designed for travel only in the atmosphere. They were occupied by some type of creature known to the thought focus as Fighter Pilots. And the creature owning the thought focus classed itself as a Geeyiy. It was of a different breed, evidently; or at least it seemed to be.

Or did it? There had been a flash of thought—a mere spark—subliminal—that the creature had a brother who was a Fighter Pilot. Incomprehensible!

Zahda Omo opened her eyes, a puzzled frown on her high, intelligent forehead. Feeling the edge of the opening she had cut, she found it cool. With one last, regretful look around at the ruins of what had been her only possibility of returning to her home planet, she climbed out and dropped to the ground.

There was darkness outside, for which she was glad. The radiations from the Sun of this planet were extremely painful in their concentrations. That Sun had sunk below the horizon less than an hour before, and she knew she would have eight full hours to find a hiding place to protect her from those rays before it rose on the opposite horizon.

Cautiously, she made her way across the unfamiliar terrain, strange odors filling the damp air and bringing hints of mold and decay coupled with odors of life. An errant tendril of atmosphere brought the heady odor of food—and was gone. It made Zadha relax, though. Since food existed she would not die.

There was the glow of a life-aura ahead. It rose from a still crumpled form. Zadha touched it briefly with her mind, but received no response. The creature was unconscious.

With a faint moan of relief she sunk to her knees beside it. Later she arose, her hunger and thirst sated.

She continued on, now, skirting places where life auras glowed faintly. The Geeyiy creatures were numerous,



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but they were of a distinctly low order of intelligence, and totally blind to all energies except a narrow band of radiation in the color band. Her own aura glowed brightly now. Yet in her wary exploration of the thought foci about her she detected not one that was aware of her stealthy progress.

Two hours later she decided she was far enough away from the ship to safely destroy it. First, though, she must find a place to hide from the radiations of the destruction.

Ahead was a cluster of towering vegetation—thick trunks topped by profuse branches clustered with flat, green leaves. From this cluster of vegetation a feeble glow of light flickered.

Softly she crept up to the source of illumination. It was some sort of dwelling place, built from machined fiber of the vegetation covered with a protective film containing mostly an oxide of lead—from its radiation.

The light came from a torn slit in a covering inside a window. Luck was with her. She was able to get an adequate view of the interior. And sounds came to her through the walls.

For another precious hour she remained motionless, studying the creatures inside, reading their thoughts, whispering them over to herself until she felt sure she could use them fluently.

The creatures were even lower than the Zoiltos, and seemed lower than the Geeyiys, but she read in their thoughts that they were non-hostile, and would be glad to welcome her if she covered herself with some wrapping they were conditioned to accept.

Sighing at the necessary delay, she sped silently back to the creature that had provided her with food. It was dead, now, so she wasted little time. Soon she was speeding back to the dwelling place. The wrappings rested on her skin with clammy touch, choking the skin cells with its odors and radiations.

She would gladly have avoided having to wear it, but she knew that there was no place she could hide safely when daylight returned—unless she made friends of these creatures; so, wear it she must.

Shortly she was at the window again. Inside nothing had changed materially. She watched and listened and probed until she was satisfied. Then she crept around to the doorway and, after studying the latching mechanism with her fingers until she had solved it, twisted the knob and pushed in on the door.

As the door opened the light blinded her. She had somewhat expected this and switched over to awareness through the thought foci of the creatures for her awareness of things external.

They accepted her. They accepted her at once, and classified her as a Waac creature, which, she discovered was their term for the female of the Geeyiy breed. But she sensed in their thought foci that they were preparing to ask her questions which might reveal evidence she was not what they accepted her to be.

Without waiting any longer she sent out the key combination. The carrier contact stopped abruptly. Automatically she opened her mouth wide to relieve the internal pressure against her eardrums in preparation for the blast wave.

Idly her mind was probing every mind in the shelter, sensing thought-states and future developments of thought-patterns. The adult female had



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noticed her pointed teeth as she opened her mouth. The adult male—she saw in one revealing glimpse the mystery of brothers being of two breeds, the Fighter Pilots and the Geeyiys—for these creatures had no breed consciousness and mated indiscriminately. The female infant alone held thoughts of innocent friendliness on a par with those of the Zoiltos.

The shock wave, even at the three miles distance, was terrific. Zadha Omo blacked out for the length of time it took for her to drop to her knees. The Earthquake followed it without a noticeable pause, lasting the full space of one enternal minute.

Zadha was busy carrying out the hastily formed plan that had entered her mind. The three creatures were conscious. Quickly Zadha stripped off the wrappings of the female, studying the details of contour and altering her own form to approximately them.

There was a specific reason for doing this. When it was completed she looked exactly like the female. Picking up the unconscious infant, she tipped over the lamp, setting fire to the shelter. Then, with the infant in her arms, she fled until she was once again out in the open fields, the stars twinkling overhead, the landscape shadowy and obscured.

The warm proximity of the young female creature in her arms, coupled with the extra effort of carrying it, soon made her hungry and thirsty again. Walking gently, she cradled the young thing's head on her shoulder. She fed sparingly, exercising great willpower, for the young blood was rich and sweet.

"Perhaps," she thought hopefully, "I can collect a small herd of these young things to replace my dead Zoiltos. Then none of them need die."

Something had been deep in the subliminal reaches of her mind, bothering her. Now, refreshed with the sweet nourishment, she was able to analyze it and intensify it. It was radiation, of a sort. Not telepathic, but modulated pure tones. The modulations were very much like the speech sounds of the creatures, but meaningless.

There was a vague familiarity about them. Finally she placed that. It was the sounds the Geeyiys used, and so must be in their speech. Yet it wasn't sound, but radiation.

She analyzed the reactions of her nervous system to these radiations and finally decided, from the effect they produced, that they must originate from a high potential condenser type of radiator.

Idly as she sped along she let the Geeyiy sounds implant themselves on her memory. Later she could find a vocalizing Geeyiy and by reading its thoughts and associating them with the sounds it emitted, she could find the meanings of those radiation sounds.

Ahead loomed the shadowy hulks of abandoned and half destroyed buildings. They had been laid out somewhat like a city, lining both sides of wide lanes.

There were the ghost-fires of auras dotting the piles of masonry, and thought-foci centering at each. Suddenly the entire area lit up from a source of ultra-color. For a few seconds it didn't alarm her. She knew it was above the visual range of these hiding creatures.

Too late she became aware that they had sensitized glasses through which they could see what the ra-



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diation lit up. They had seen her!

Frantically she thought of flight—and read in their minds the knowledge that if she fled they would kill her. But along with that she read of their acceptance of her as one of the creatures they called "a woman." The young creature in her arms they called "a kid."

For some strange reason they didn't seem to want to let her know they were there. She read in their minds a confidence that she couldn't be aware of them.

She stole cautiously down the wide lane, wonderingly and hesitantly, until she noticed a place that might be ideal for her to hide in, which was empty.

She climbed over a pile of rubble and settled herself and the unconscious kid. Now, rapidly, she was learning the meaning of Geeyiy sounds, and understanding the messages she had picked up in the radio waves.

A strange, an utterly fantastic picture was slowly forming from the bits of knowledge she was piecing together. The messages were concerned with the destruction of the ship. It was not the misinterpretations they had placed on that which interested her, however. It was the fantastic realization that the creatures were totally lacking in breed lines, genetically.

Concentrating on that line of information to the exclusion of all else, she unravelled the radio messages, and probed questioningly into the minds of the Geeyiys hidden in the ruins nearby, and soon completed the picture.

It was fantastic—and Zadha Omo wasn't conscious of that fact that the descriptive was becoming repetitious. They not only did not have semblance of breed affinity, but also they often did not realize individually what breed line was dominant in their structure.

"But why?" she asked herself, wonderingly. "And how?" she contacted thought-focus after thought-focus, and held them all in contact, sensing that they were not even able to recognize thought contact!

She grew bolder, holding direct conversations with them all—and they worried slightly, thinking they were getting "crazy" or on the verge of "nervous breakdown." Strange concepts!

"What is 'crazy'?" she sent out, and a hundred minds took up the idea and developed it from the personal angle, worriedly, thinking the question had arisen in their own minds. And out of the hundred mental pictures of "crazy" she gathered that "going crazy" was to develop latent mental powers which were agreed to be "crazy," and that, from their universal attitude, she was the epitome of insanity!

And they were all cattle breeds. Their normal source of food was dead and decaying vegetable and animal tissue, just as it was with the Zoiltos, though they were far less intelligent than even a defective Zoilto.

"Are there any of my own breed?" she asked wonderingly, inserting the question into the thoughts of the creatures about her in the ruins. The word, Fwoumie, gave no response—except that one center associated it with "Zombie," which seemed to contain the proper understanding of the nature of a Fwoumie, but in a divergent, disassociated way. It seemed a zombie was a "living-dead" creature,



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and also a "drink," but with no connection in the two meanings.

Experimentally she created in each thought-focus the elements of Fwoumie desire for living blood—with startling results. One creature cut his own throat, and fell, his thoughts chaotic and almost, but not quite, accepting the Fwoumie norm. "Somewhere in the foundations of his mind," Zadha concluded. "Are the genes of a Fwoumie."

The creature had been with only one other in a small room. The other creature was fighting the Fwoumie hunger for blood Zadha had induced in his mind. She increased it, hoping to bring into its consciousness a memory of the existence of her breed on this planet.

Finally she gave up. There was only one conclusion to be formed. In this indiscriminately mixed mongrel brood of cattle there was no knowledge of Fwoumies, just as there was no knowledge of breeds.

There was a concept of "race," but it was a strange, meaningless concept—unless—

She forced the hundred or so thought-foci about her to dwell on that—and arrived at a picture of utterly rigid body form—creatures that thought themselves ugly and were not able to beautify their forms—creatures that thought themselves handsome, and thought it something to be proud and vain about. Creatures that thought themselves intelligent, but who did not have the intelligence to understand more than vaguely what intelligence was—confusing it with ability to remember, and with rudimentary skills they had acquired.

And out of all this, Zadha Omo gained a picture of millions of creatures attempting to destroy one another systematically for no reason, and engaging in the most depraved methods of bringing death—yet outraged and alarmed because they believed the enemy had used what they thought of as an atom bomb.

"Why!" Zadha exclaimed to herself. "Transposing one of their concepts to my own viewpoint, these creatures, due no doubt to the complete absence of a disciplining power, are all insane, and believe themselves sane merely because their concept of sanity is 'conformation to the norm'!"

The kid in her arms stirred restlessly, opened its eyes, muttered a sleepy, "Mama," and, putting its arms about her neck, sighed deeply and lapsed again into unconsciousness.

"Oui, mon Cheri," Zadha soothed, aping the tones of the kid's mother, now a charred corpse back in the ashes of the shelter, two miles or so away.

Three of the creatures who seemed in authority over all those gathered in the ruins were listening to what they thought of as a radio—an instrument to transform the monotone radiations into sound itself, and take those sounds and convert them into variations on a monotone radiator.

Relaxing, Zadha Omo concentrated a corner of her mind on the thought activity of these three as they listened to the radio.

An estimated two hundred thousand of the cattle had been killed by the destroying of the space ship. A breed—no, she would have to get used to considering them as classes of creatures, not breeds—a class of the creatures called Technicians was examining the area of the destruction, and seemed very amazed at the lack of



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radiation and unstable matter present there now.

Zadha was slightly amused at this amazement. These cattle eveidently knew so little about nucleonics that they were unacquainted with the cleanly disrupting rocket fuels that left only a stable nuclei.

They seemed more alarmed than curious about their discoveries in the area. They recognized from their examinations that a type of explosion they were unacquainted with had taken place—but concluded from that that the enemy had made a technological advance over them.

There was a discussion over the radio, and even among the three Geeyiys, as to whether surrender or use of atom bombs would take place.

Suddenly Zadha's thoughts were electrified by a stray thought rising from the mind of one of the other Geeyiys, which he had unconsciously telepathed to her without being aware it was thought transmission.

The thoughts she had induced in his mind had finally born fruit. He DID know of others of her kind! But—she sagged in disappointment. They no longer existed. They had been known as Vampires. She coaxed along his thoughts, gently, not daring to alarm him and start up another emotional storm.

It took almost an hour to bring it all out. The creature kept trying to get its mind off the subject, still feeling a strange repugnance for it.

In the end she knew. The Vampires had not been a breed, but merely like all the rest—the result of chance combinations of genes in the gigantic shuffle—unable to breed true and survive.

"Fwoumies whose parents were cattle and whose children were cattle!" she thought disgustedly.

That thought set a train of thinking going in her mind. Perhaps—perhaps it might be possible to take over the direction of life on this planet and isolate the various breeds into true ones again. In a few centuries or a few hundreds of centuries conditioning could be accomplished. The Fwoumie gene structure existed in the shuffle. It could be isolated. And her own could lend it strength.

The thought of that made her shudder—to mate with cattle or less than cattle. But in the end she would be repaid by having her own kind about her—helping her straighten out the horrible, mixed-up life pattern, that created a norm of insanity and bestiality which graced a creature with noble qualities if he destroyed other creatures—but made him wretch or cut his own throat in the storm of psychoses set up by the personalized thought of feeding on living blood of creatures shaped like himself.

Of course, part of that came from the fact that all creatures on this planet were, in effect, one breed—a horribly mixed-up mongrel breed. There were the nature-forms. She had sensed those, too, in her explorations. They occupied their true status as food sources for the cattle.

"Perhaps—" Zadha fell asleep without completing the thought forming in her mind. And the kid in her arms slept on, with her, its hollow cheeks deathly white, its pulse slow and feeble, but growing stronger hour after hour as the Sun rose high in the heavens over the pile of stone and slowly settled in the west.

The excited murmur of conversation settled in an abrupt silence as all



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eyes turned to Watch Major Sid Everheart cross the mess hall and take his place at the technicians' table.

Sid looked around at the eager faces, then relaxed with a tolerant chuckle.

"She looks rather nice," he introduced the subject. "For a former enemy. One of those terrible names, though. Zadhaomoski." A frown of self-annoyance crossed his face. "Gives me the creeps and gives me the impulse to make love at the same time. But she knows her stuff."

"What's her first name?" Major Joe Graem asked.

"For all I know she doesn't have one, Joe," Sid answered. "Madame Zadhaomoski is the only name she's given. From all she's told us she must have been right in the inner circle. Not only that, she's a scientist of a far higher calibre than I could ever hope to be. Knows the secret of the new bomb they used, and when we told her what our own latest bomb could do she told us at once more than we knew about it ourselves. It was the real stuff, too. We checked with Oak Ridge and they were ready to have us court-martialed for putting top secret stuff on the wires until they did a double take and remembered we couldn't have known the stuff because they just finished spending three hundred million dollars finding it out themselves. And hadn't told anyone at all!"

Several amazed whistles sounded over the mess hall at this bit of information.

"Then she's really a top enemy scientist!" someone exclaimed.

"More than that," Major Sid Everheart went on. "She's in on their plans, too. When she first walked into G.H.Q. day before yesterday the first thing she did was warn us of a thrust to the southeast of here. She gave us details. Number of men, type of equipment, times and places, and objectives. She seemed as familiar with our own placements as theirs, too, indicating that she had access to their latest data. Her information saved a hundred thousand lives at least, not to mention the fact that it enabled us to hold the blast area a while longer and keep the enemy from sending their own scientists to check up on the blast of their atom bomb. Two weeks have gone by since they dropped it, and they're getting anxious to get there before it cools off."

"Yeah, we know that, Sid," Joe Graem said impatiently. "Tell us more about this Madam Zadhaomoski. What's she like? Sixty? Fine old dame type? Oh, I forgot. You said you wanted to make love to her. Why didn't you?"

"Aside from G.H.Q. and Washington battling over whether she's more important here or at home," Sid said with a withering look. "She gives me the feeling that if I kissed her she'd be as disgusted as I would if a slobbery hound jumped up and planted its wet nose in my mouth."

"That kind, huh," Joe said.

"No," Sid said, frowning over his food. "She just doesn't go for me. She's certainly a fine person, though. You ought to see the batch of thin, anemic looking orphans she brought in with her. G.H.Q. wanted to ship them off to a concentration center, but she wouldn't have any of it. She insisted on them staying. She sees that they got the best food, too. Even made us give up one whole officers' hut for her and them so she can even watch over them when they're asleep."



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He ate in silence for a minute, the frown still on his face.

"I think she has a mother fixation." he added finally. "Probably had some kids of her own she had to sacrifice or desert when she came over. Thinks she can compensate for them by helping war orphans. I even heard a rumor that she insists on eating with them, and tries to give them all her food."

He shook his head in mystification and lapsed into silence while he concentrated on eating.

Zadha Omo studied her features in the mirror. They were rather beautiful, she thought, though not from the standards of the Fwoumies. Their beauty was a sort of sub-standard mongrel type—shaped from the composite "dream girl" of a hundred or more high minded GI's.

She had laid her plans carefully, drawing on the well of information about her in the battle area, injecting questions in the minds of soldiers and getting answers back with complete safety, protected by the rationalizing properties built into the Earthman complex which made him believe impressed thoughts were his own, or—if he thought they weren't—made him keep quiet so his fellows wouldn't think him "nuts."

She had seen, and built on, the power of sex. Even so—she frowned darkly at the thought—these Earth cattle had an animal instinct against her that rested in the deep seat of the unconscious. To counteract that she had to build in each of them a strong desire for her, so they could rationalize their revulsion by connecting it with their sense of morality. It was a ticklish job, and would have been totally impossible with a non-telepathetic breed, or a telepathic one which knew its abilities.

She could—she smiled at the expression derived from a game of these cattle—stack the deck every time and deal off the bottom. But there was one part of her physical appearance which she could not change.

She opened her well formed—according to Earth standards—lips, revealing her even, gleaming teeth. Slowly from in back of the two eye teeth there came into view a tapering, needle-pointed extra tooth—hollow, and sharp as a new hypodermic needle. They extended slightly forward below the eye teeth until they were about three sixteenths of an inch longer.

The rattling of the doorknob startled her. The fangs drew in instantly as she turned her head.

"Yes?" she called questioningly.

A child's voice, in French, said a man was there to see her. She answered in French that she would be right out, then hastily made a last inspection of her appearance. She wondered who it could be at this hour. It was time for the children to sleep and for her to—feed. She frowned in annoyance. She was hungry.

Her frown deepened as she contacted the mind of the creature. It was the one called Major Sidney Everheart, and he was here to begin what he considered his "courtship" of her.

"What a strange, mixed-up mind," she thought pityingly, as she studied his thoughts. His mind, as he paced back and forth in the first room of the Quonset hut, was filled with an instinctive revulsion for her—disguised as lust. Battling that conscious lust springing from subconscious revulsion was a desperately rationalizing pattern



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of noble desires arising from a pattern of sex ideals—and the objective of the inner battle was not to arrive at a true understanding of the revulsion, but to completely subjugate it and obliterate it!

She was in sympathy with that, but the ultimate objective of this creature would have to be thwarted. It was marriage and children—and the Fwoumie gene complex was so diluted in him that except for the fact that he was a member of the species that possessed it, he might as well be considered as not having it.

Still—she frowned at herself in annoyance—she had to admit she was lonely. And she had to admit that slowly and subtly the norm of this race of cattle was becoming less and less revolting to her.

She smiled at herself in the mirror before turning away, and the smile was as sweet and womanly a smile as any cattle might desire. It was still on her lips as she entered the doorway and advanced toward Major Sidney Everheart.

"And to what do I owe this unexpected visit, Major Everheart?" she asked in a throaty voice, rich with warm undertones.

"No reason at all, Madam Zdahaomoski," Sid replied, accepting her outstretched hand and holding it comfortably as long as good taste permitted. When he let go he turned away, hiding his facial expressions under the pretext of getting a chair for her. "I was—lonely—and thought perhaps you might like to talk."

"About what?" she asked innocently, beginning to enjoy the man.

Sid picked up two chairs and brought them to the center of the room where he placed them so they were neither facing each other formally, nor exactly side-by-side.

"About—what your first name might be, for one thing," he replied boldly. "And whether the 'Madam' to your name means you're married."

"My first name," she replied, setting down and smoothing her dress, "is Zadha. The 'madam' is to frighten away would-be suitors." She followed this with a disarming smile.

"And also friends?" Sid asked with an equally disarming smile of his onw.

"What do you make of it all, sir?" As the grey haired General asked the question all eyes turned intently, waiting for the X-ray specialist to speak

"Frankly, General," the specialist said, shaking his head. "I don't know what to think. Look at that chin." His finger touched that portion of the blown up print. "In outline it is a normal chin—but look at it. There is a light area sharply delineated from a darker area, showing that the normal outline of the chin is a new growth—of cartilage. But according to standard shadings the old part isn't bone, either, but cartilage. Of course, I'm not positive of that, because the conditions under which these X-rays were taken could possibly have been bad—wrong voltage, clothing, the variable qualities of the thin wall hiding the machine and the plates, and so on."

His finger darted nervously to the roof of the mouth.

"And look at that!" he said. "If those aren't teeth I'll eat my hat. But look at them! Tapered to a needle point. Entirely in the roof of the mouth, but at an angle of forty-five



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degrees. And look at those sinus cavities connected to the tissue in back of them. Also, where's the bony roof of the mouth?"

"What do you make of it?" the General repeated.

"I don't know, sir," the man said. "I'd say you have a practical joker over there—or this is the X-ray of a vampire in the FORM of a human being. I say in the form of one, because the entire picture shows evidence of recent skeletal growth and perhaps equally recent absorption of parts of the old skeleton. Look at those knobs on the hands. They're as indicative of this creature having had seven fingers as a snake's hip bones are that it once had legs. Look at the skull. I'd venture a guess that the owner of that skull has a brain four ounces heavier than anything known before. Look at the senseless shadows in the torso. No way of telling what kind of digestive system it has—if it has one."

He took a deep breath and plunged.

"I'd say this is the X-ray of a non-human creature that gains its energy by drawing blood through those two teeth in the roof of its mouth directly into its own bloodstream. I'd say the creature has the power to change its shape within limits by the exercise of its will—indicated by its close imitation of the human skeleton which could only have been purposive. There you have it."

"That would mean those two pointed teeth are able to move out?" the General asked.

"Definitely yes," he replied. "Look at the cartilage surrounding each, and the lack of bone. And those teeth are almost an inch and a half long. They could move out a full inch and still be firm!"

"That ties in then," the General said, looking knowingly at the other officers in the room. "Proven knowledge beyond ours, and beyond that possible to the enemy at this stage, indicating a more advanced technology; proven knowledge of our movement that could only come through perfect telepathy—and of the enemy's movements that could come from the same power—or from being told by them. But that atomic explosion could not possibly have come from any Earth-produced bomb. It could have been a space ship, or it could have been a bomb set off to impress us in some way, or—and I hate to think of this possibility—with her proven alien origin and her proven supernormal powers, it might possibly have been a disruption of the matter in that area by some unknown force which she can produce at will. If that is the case we have something very dangerous in that woman. She might be the nearest thing to invincibility we can ever meet up with."

"I would say, sir," an old man in civilian clothes spoke up. "That it couldn't have been an atomic explosion. If it had been there would have been after effects of induced radioactivity in the soil that could not have been prevented."

"Yes, I know," the General said politely. "We've been through that, and—"

"I'd like to ask a question," the X-ray specialist interrupted. "If this creature is able to read minds so easily, how does it—she—what I mean is, how did you keep her from knowing about these X-rays?"

"I can see you don't know how a



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modern war is conducted," the General said dryly. "We have our own group of men and women who can—sometimes—read minds. The enemy has also. We've built up a technique of doing things without anyone knowing anything. And," he smiled humorlessly. "She seems to discount our abilities considerably. So far she has shown no curiosity about routine duties."

"What has she shown curiosity about?" the specialist asked.

"Just people," the General replied quietly. "And chief among them are the fourteen French war orphans she brought into camp with her—suffering from anemia."

"God!" the specialist exploded. "So that's it! Why didn't you give orders to have her killed?"

The General suddenly looked grey around the eyes.

"I wish it were that simple, sir," he answered. "We don't know whether or not she could be killed, and if we try it she might destroy another hundred thousand men with another blast of some kind. Then, if she went over to the enemy, she would find them quite willing to give her plenty of victims for her supply of blood. The information about atom bombs she unwittingly gave us in her attempts to prove she was an enemy scientist has saved us three months and a hundred million dollars directly—and God knows how much indirectly, since the war is costing a billion and a half a day. Inhuman as it sounds, it is better to let her take her pound of flesh than to run the risk of losing the war."

"You'd better take that remark off the record, General," the specialist said, chidingly. His tone changed. "I wonder where such a fantastic creature could have come from? There must be more like her, some place. What a situation! A being from another planet or even, maybe, from a planet of another star. And unfortunately the human race would instinctively turn against her and her race regardless of their intentions, because the very idea of vampirism is so repugnant. Right now, if it was known to the general public, there would be a public clamor to destroy her—and I feel the same way about it."

"I know," the General said. "I wish I knew what to do. Even the President hasn't been told about this yet. It's a terrific responsibility. If we were sure she was alone, and could be made harmless, I would give orders to capture her. She could be kept alive and healthy by rigging up some sort of plastic feeding tube for her to sink her teeth in, and the blood she uses for food could be supplied by the blood bank. I—I'm glad I'm here in Washington. If I were over there I'm afraid I would do something foolish. I don't like the idea of those children."

"Zadha," Sid said, "What a beautiful name. My grandfather used to sing a song about a girl named Jadha. You seem awfully young to be such a great scientist—Zadha."

"Oh, but I'm not," Zadha Omo said quickly. "That is, I'm—I'm twenty-eight. That's awfully old. And I've been a scientist for over ten years now. You see, I received special training to be a scientist."

"Yes," Sid said. "I rather imagined that was the way it was. You were fortunate to escape."

Zadha read in his mind that he



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was about to get up and walk over and kiss her. She wondered what it would be like to be kissed by one of these cattle. She was amazed that she could wonder what it would be like. And, suddenly, she was very lonely. Arotlan, her home planet, was fifteen light years away. There was not yet the technology on this planet to build a ship to take her back. There probably never would be unless she took control and shaped the civilization to that end. That might take a thousand years . . .

Sid's lips against her's were strong. The last bit of revulsion to this cattle receded into the background of her mind. She knew that later she would feel nausea at the memory, but right now she let herself go.

Suddenly Sid jumped away with an exclamation of pain. She saw the expression of horror on his face. Too late she realized that her own instincts had betrayed her.

She saw in his mind what he was going to do. Frantically she tried to change his thoughts—insert her own. She saw clearly why she couldn't. The cattle creature, unconditioned and unable to control his own system to any reasonable extent, had instinctively flooded his blood stream with Adrenalin. His suprarenal glands were on a rampage, and under the floor of adrenalin his behavior pattern was automatic—beyond control even by himself.

She saw the heavy forty-five automatic come out of its holster. She prepared to withstand the shock of metal tearing through her. And even as she prepared she kept trying to redirect his thoughts.

Then her mind was numbed by the force of the first slug as it tore through her. Quickly she constricted torn veins and arteries. But as quickly another slug tore into her and another, and another.

Dazedly she realized it would take days and days for the healing hormones to restore the damage. Her spine was shattered in several places. The skin of her back was ripped in a dozen places from the destruction of flattening lead as it passed through her. One of her hearts was torn badly and inoperative, and the arteries had constricted to shut off the flow.

The creature had stopped shooting at her, finally. It stared down at her blankly as sanity sought its way to the surface of its mind. The emptied gun hung slackly in a limp hand, and slipped out slowly, to land on the floor with a dull thud.

Then the creature turned and stumbled toward the door. It was gone. She read in its mind that it was going to get others. Even if it didn't, she would need help she could not get on this planet. The rich blood of real Zoiltos rather than that of the children. Zoiltos that would bend over her and let her feed on their blood. None of these cattle would do such a thing—could not do such a thing. Their instincts would prevent them.

Regretfully she made her decision. She would have to go home. It would take terrific energy. She would have to be careful.

A feeling of intense pity overwhelmed her momentarily for the creatures of this mad planet, so mixed up genetically, so unintelligent that they considered a dim spark of intelligence to be outstanding genius, so ruled by their emotions, and so—insane—that was an utterly new concept —so insane that the most they could



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achieve was a thin surface of rationality over a mass of psychoses and animal behavior patterns.

"I must be—very careful—children," Zadha Omo said, looking at the white faces staring at her from the doorway. She looked at them a long moment. They were her Earth Zoiltos, her pets. She had gathered them from the fields and the ruins of buildings. They had been ill and near Death. She had fed richly on the sleeping adult natives and then filled her bloodsacs with plasma, rich in her own healing hormones, and sunk her fangs into their veins and forced the plasma in—to heal. They owed their very lives to her. And even they would vomit in disgust and horror when they learned how she fed.

"Goodbye, children," she whispered.

"The pilot just reported, sir," the soldier said, saluting smartly. "His plane will reach the field in twenty minutes."

The General nodded without replying.

"What happened, sir?" the specialist asked when the soldier had gone. "I got word to be here, but nothing more."

"It seems," the General said with a short laugh, "That one of the officers over there discovered what she was, and went temporarily insane—maybe permanently. He—and the body—are both on the plane coming in. He went mad and empted his gun in her. Fourteen forty-five slugs—and she still lived long enough to make a good attempt at getting revenge. Fortunately she died before she could get her revenge working."

"You mean another big explosion?" the specialist asked.

"We'll never know," the General replied. "All we know is that the temperature dropped from eighty-seven to forty in a space of less time than the thermometers themselves could drop, an area ten miles across suddenly developed zero-zero fog, and it snowed over an area of two hundred square miles for three hours before winds set in and dispersed the low pressure area. It all began within fifteen minutes after the officer shot her, and right about the time those fourteen children stood in the doorway and watched her die."

"Fourteen bullets in her and she did all that!" the specialist said, awed. "Will I get a chance to examine that body?"

"It's all yours," the General said dryly. "Write a book about it. I want to read it. But right now I'm more interested in what Major Everheart has to say—if he's rational yet. The world may never know it, but he probably is the savior of mankind. I want to have a talk with him before the psychiatrists get him and restore his mental balance—by making him forget."

The two men stood side by side watching the plane as it came in for a landing, its jet engines cut off; and on their two faces were expressions of maturely subdued but nevertheless eager anticipation.

Major Sidney Everheart saw them standing there as he was led from the plane. Some corner of his mind registered the recognition of the General's features.

But it made no emotional impression on his mind. His mind was dulled except for one, dominating, horrible vision. It was the vision of

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if you do know—*how do you know?*"

The Councilman paled. He said, lamely, "We are experienced, Sire, in judging who is to live and who is not to live among the newborn. There are signs, reliable signs. *She*—" he pointed an accusatory finger at Margaret Lazenby—"exhibits them."

"Indeed, Dr. Pausanias? We admit that a child emerging from the Birth Machine with such a deformed chest would be among those exposed—but how is that deformity an indication of character?"

"It is written in her face, Sire."

"In *her* face? Have you suddenly learned a new language, Doctor?"

"Sire, it was a slip of the tongue. *His* face."

"So . . . Face us, Margaret Lazenby . . . Look at us." The King's right hand went up to and stroked his short beard. "We read no treachery in your countenance. There is a softness, better suited to a children's nurse than to a warrior, but there is courage, and there is honesty."

"Sire! Pausanius was becoming desperate. "Do not forget that sh... that he is an alien being. Do not forget that in these cases expression is meaningless. A woods boar, for example, will smile—but not from amiability. He smiles when at his most ferocious."

"And so do men at times." The King grinned, his teeth very white in his dark, bearded face. "We become ferocious, and we smile, when Councilmen presume to tell us our business." He raised his voice. "Guards! Remove this man."

"But, Sire . . ."

"Enough."

There was a scuffle at the back of the chamber as the Doctor was hustled out by four hoplites. Brasidus noticed, with grim satisfaction, that none of the man's scarlet-robed colleagues made any move to defend him. He thought, *Cresphontes knows where his real strength lies. With us, the military.*

"Lieutenant Commander Grimes!"

"Your Majesty?"

"We have decided that you may carry out your survey. You and your officers and men, both human and Arcadian, may leave your ship—but only as arranged with our Captain Diomedes, and only under escort. Is that quite clear?"

"Quite clear, Your Majesty. We shall see only what we are allowed to see."

"You have made a correct assessment of the situation. And now, as we have matters of import to discuss with our Council, you are dismissed."

The space captain saluted and then, slowly, he and Margaret Lazenby backed from the royal presence. Brasidus accompanied them. Beyond the door to the Throne Room the escort fell in about them.

As they marched out of the Palace to the waiting car Grimes asked, "Brasidus, what will happen to that Doctor? The one who was dragged out of the Chamber?"

"He will be beheaded, probably. But he is lucky."

*"Lucky?"*

"Yes. If he were not a Doctor and a Councilman he could have his arms and legs lopped off before being exposed on the hillside with the defective children."

"You're joking, Brasidus!" exclaimed Margaret Lazenby.

"Joking? Of course not."

The Arcadian turned to his cap-



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tain. "John, can't we *do* something?"

Grimes shook his head. "Anything that we could do would mean the death of more than one man. Besides, our strict orders are not to interfere."

"It is expedient," said Margaret Lazenby bitterly, "that one man should die for the good of the people."

"Careful, Peggy. This place may be bugged. Remember that *we* aren't members of the Council . . ."

"Spoken like a true naval officer of these decadent days. I often think that the era of gunboat diplomacy had much to recommend it."

## Chapter 12

They rode back to the spaceport almost in silence. Brasidus realized that the two foreigners had been shocked when told of the probable fate of Pausanius. But why should they be? He could not understand it. Surely on their world, on any world, insolence toward the King himself must result in swift and drastic punishment. To make their reaction even stranger, the Doctor had spoken against them, not for them.

They sped through the streets of the city, one chariot rattling ahead of the hovercar, the second astern of it. There were more people abroad now, more sightseers; word must have gotten around that aliens from the ship were at large. Citizen and helot, every man stared with avid curiosity at the Arcadian.

Margaret Lazenby shuddered. He muttered, "John, I don't like this planet at all, at all. I'd have said once that to be one woman in a world of men would be marvelous. But it's not. I'm being undressed by dozens of pairs of eyes. Do you know, I was afraid that the King was going to order me to strip . . ."

"That shouldn't worry an Arcadian," John Grimes told him. "After all, you're all brought up as nudists."

"And I don't see why it should worry him," Brasidus put in, "unless he is ashamed of his deformities."

Margaret Lazenby flared, "To begin with, Sergeant, I'm not deformed. Secondly, the correct pronouns to use insofar as *I* am concerned are *she* and *her*. Got it?"

"And are those pronouns to be used when talking of the other spacemen who are similarly . . . malformed?" asked Brasidus.

"Yes. But, as a personal favor, will you, please, stop passing remarks about the shape of my body?"

"All right." Then he said, meaning no offense, "On Sparta nobody is deformed."

"Not *physically*," remarked Margaret Lazenby nastily, and then it was the Sergeant's turn to lapse into sulky silence, one that remained unbroken all the rest of the way to the ship.

Brasidus left the spacemen at the barrier, then reported to Spaceport Security. Diomedes was seated in his inner office, noisily enjoying his midday meal. He waved the Sergeant to a bench, gestured towards the food and drink on the table. "Help yourself, young man. And how did things go? Just the important details. I already know that the King has agreed to let Grimes carry out some sort of survey, and I've just received word that Pausanius has lost his head . . . But what were *your* impressions?"



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Deliberately Brasidus filled a mug with beer. Officers were allowed stronger liquor than the lower ranking hoplites, even those with the status of sergeants. He rather hoped that the day would soon come when he would be able to enjoy this tipple in public. He gulped pleasurably. Then he said, "It must be a funny world that they come from. To begin with, they didn't seem to have any real respect for the King. Oh, they were correct enough, but . . . I could sense, somehow, that they were rather looking down on him. And *then* . . . They were shocked, sir, really shocked when I told them what was going to happen to Pausanius. It's hard to credit."

"In my job, I'm ready and willing to credit anything. But go on."

"This Margaret Lazenby, the Arcadian. She seems to have a terror of nudity . . ."

*"She,* Brasidus?"

"Ye, sir. She told me to refer to her as 'she' . . . Do you know, it sounds and feels *right,* somehow."

"Go on."

"You'll remember, sir, that we saw a picture in Lieutenant Commander Grimes' cabin of what seemed to be a typical beach scene on Arcadia. Everybody was naked."

"H'm. But you will recall that in that picture humans and Arcadians were present in roughly equal numbers. To know that one is in all ways inferior is bad enough. To be inferior *and* in the minority—that's rather much. His—or her—attitude as far as this world is concerned makes sense, Brasidus. But how did it come up?"

"She said, when we were driving back through the city, that she felt as though she were being undressed by the eyes of all the people looking at her. (Why should she have that effect on humans? I'm always wondering myself what she is like under her uniform.) And she said that she was afraid that King Cresphontes was going to order her to strip in front of him and the Council."

"Men are afflicted by peculiar phobias, Brasidus. You've heard of Teleclus, of course?"

"The Lydian general, sir?"

"The same. A brave man, a very brave man, as his record shows. But let a harpy get into his tent and he's a gibbering coward." He picked up a meaty bone, gnawed on it meditatively. "So don't run away with the idea that this Arcadian is outrageously unhuman in his—or 'her'—reactions." He smiled greasily. "She may be more human than you dream."

"What are you getting at, sir? What do you *know?"*

Diomedes waved the bone playfully at Brasidus. "Only what my officers tell me. Apart from that—I'm Security, so nobody tells me anything. Which reminds me, there's something I must tell you. Your little friend Achron has been ringing this office all mornint, trying to get hold of you." He frowned. "I don't want you to drop him like a hot cake now that you've acquired a new playmate."

*"What* new playmate, sir?"

"Oh, never mind, never mind. Just keep in with Achron, that's all. We still want to find out what's going on at the Creche, alien ships or no alien ships. As I've said—and I think you'll agree—it seems to tie in."

"But, sir, wouldn't it be simple just to stage a raid?"

"I like my job, Brasidus—but I like



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the feel of my head on my shoulders much better. The Doctors are the most powerful branch of the priesthood. This Pausanius—do you think that the King would have acted as he did if he hadn't known that he, Pausanius, was in bad with his own colleagues? All that happened was that he got himself a public execution instead of a very private one."

"It all seems very complicated, Captain."

"You can say that again, Brasidus." Diomedes tossed his bone into the trash basket. "Now . . ." He picked up a sheaf of crumpled, grease-stained papers from the untidy table. "We have to consider your future employment. You'll not be required for escort duties this afternoon. I shall be arranging his itinerary with Lieutenant Commander Grimes. And tomorrow the bold space captain and his Arcadian side-kick will not be escorted by yourself."

"And why not, sir?"

"Because you'll be working—working with your hands. You've plain-clothes experience. You can mix with helots as one of them and get away with it. This afternoon you pay a call on Alessis, who is both an Engineer and—but let it go no further—on our payroll. Tomorrow Alessis with a gang of laborers will carry out the annual overhaul of the refrigerating machinery in the Andronicus warehouse. You will be one of the laborers."

"But I don't know anything about refrigeration, sir."

"Alessis should be able to teach you all that a common laborer should know this afternoon."

"But the other helots, sir. They'll know that I'm not a regular member of the gang and become suspicious."

"They won't. Alessis has just recruited green labor from at least half a dozen outlying villages. You'll be the one big city boy in the crowd. Oh, this will please you. Your friend Heraklion will not be in the Creche. He has been called urgently to his estate. It seems that a fire of unknown origin destroyed his farm outbuildings . . ."

"Unknown origin, sir?"

"Of course."

"But what has the Andronicus warehouse to do with the Creche?"

"I don't know yet. But I hope to find out."

Brasidus returned to the Barracks in Diomedes' car, changed there into civilian clothes. He had been given the address of Alessis' office, walked there briskly. The Engineer—a short, compact man in a purple-trimmed tunic—was expecting him. He said, "Be seated, Lieutenant. And I warn you now that tomorrow, on the job, I shall be addressing you as 'hey, you!'"

"I'm used to plain clothes work, sir."

"As a helot?"

"Yes. As a helot."

"As a *stupid* helot?"

"If that is what's required."

"It will be. You're going to wander off by yourself and get lost. You'll be tracing the gas supply main—that will be your story if anybody stumbles on you. I was supposed to be giving you an afternoon's tuition in refrigeration techniques, but that will not be necessary. All I ask of my helots is that they lift when I tell them to lift, put down when I tell them to put down, and so on and so



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forth. They're the brawn and I'm the brain. Get it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Can you read a plan?"

"I can."

"Splendid." Alessis got up, opened a drawer of his desk and pulled out a large roll of tough paper. He flattened it out. "Now, this is the basement of the Andronicus warehouse. Power supply comes in *here,*" his stubby forefinger jabbed, "through a conduit. Fans here, compressors here—all the usual. The cold chambers are all on the floor above—with the exception of this one. Deep freeze—very deep freeze, in fact."

"There's no reason why it shouldn't be in the basement."

"None at all. And there's no reason why it should be up one floor, with the other chambers. But it's not its location that's odd."

"Then what is?"

"It's got two doors, Brasidus. One opening into the basement, the other one right at the back. I found this second door, quite by chance, when I was checking the insulation."

"And where does it lead to?"

"That is the question. I think, although I am not sure, that there is a tunnel behind it. And I think that the tunnel runs to the Creche."

"But why?"

Alessis shrugged. "That's what our mutual friend Diomedes wants to find out."

## Chapter 13

A black, windowless cube, ugly, forbidding, the Andronicus warehouse stood across the cobbled street from the gracefully proportioned Creche complex. To its main door, a few minutes before 0800 hours, slouched the gang of workmen employed by Alessis, among them Brasidus. He was wearing dirty, ill-fitting coveralls, and he was careful not to walk with a military stride, proceeded with a helot's shamble.

The other men looked at him, and he looked at them. He saw a bunch of peasantry from the outlying villages, come to the city to (they vaguely hoped) better themselves. They saw a man like themselves—but a little cleaner, a little better fed, a little more intelligent. There were grunted self-introductions. Then—"You'll be the gaffer?" asked one of the workmen.

"No," admitted Brasidus. "He'll be along with Alessis."

The Engineer arrived in his hovercar, his foreman riding with him. They got out of the vehicle and the foreman went to the doorway, pressed the bell push set to one side of it. Then he said, "Jump to it, you erks. Get the tools out of the car." Brasidus—his years of training were not easily sloughed off—took the lead, swiftly formed an efficient little working party to unload spanners, hammers, gas cylinders and electrical equipment. He heard the chargerhand say to his employer, "Who's that new man, sir? We could use a few more like him."

Slowly the door opened. It was thick, Brasidus noted. It appeared to be armored. It looked capable of withstanding a chariot charge, or even the fire of medium artillery. It would have been more in keeping with a fortress than a commercial building. In it stood a man dressed in the grey tunic of an Industrialist. That made him a helot, although one of a superior class. Nonetheless his salutation



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of Alessis was not that of an inferior to a superior. There could even have been a hint of condescension.

The maintenance gang filed into the building—the Engineer and his foreman unhampered, Brasidus and the others carrying the gear. So far there was little to be seen—just a long, straight corridor between featureless metal walls, terminating in yet another door. But it was all so clean, so sterile, impossibly so for Sparta. It reminded Brasidus of the interior of John Grimes' ship—but even that, by comparison, had a lived-in feel to it.

The further door was heavily insulated. Beyond it was a huge room, crowded with machinery at the use of which Brasidus could only guess. Pumps, perhaps, and compressors, and dozens of white-faced gauges. Nothing was in motion; every needle rested at Zero.

"Have you everything you want, Alessis?" asked the Industrialist.

"I think so. Nothing's been giving any trouble since the last overhaul?"

"No. I need hardly tell you that the Deep Freeze is, as always, Top Priority. But *Hera's* not due for another couple of months."

"Not to worry, what's the hurry?" quipped the Engineer. Then, to his foreman, "O.K., Cimon, you can start taking the main compressor down. One of you . . ." he looked over his workmen carefully although making a decision . . . "come with me to the basement to inspect the Deep Freeze. You'll do, fellow. Bring a hammer and a couple of screw drivers. And a torch."

Brasidus opened the hatch in the floor for Alessis and then, as he followed the Engineer down to the lower level, managed to shut it after himself. It was not difficult; the insulation, although thick, was light. In the basement there was more machinery, seeming, thought Brasidus, to duplicate the engines on the floor above. It, too, was silent. And there was the huge, insulated door that he, as instructed by Alessis, opened.

The chamber beyond it was not cooled down, but a residual chill seemed to linger in the still air. Physical or psychological? Or psychic? There was . . . something; some influence, some subtle emanation, that resulted in the slight, involuntary shudder, the sudden, prickly gooseflesh. It was as though there were a million voices—subsonic? supersonic? on the verge of audibility—crying out to be heard, striving, in vain, to impart a message. The voices of the dead? Brasidus must have spoken aloud, for Alessis siad, "Or the not yet born."

"What do you mean?" demanded Brasidus. "What do you mean?"

"I . . . I don't know, Lieutenant.

"What do you mean?" demanded Brasidus. "What do you mean?"

"I . . . I don't know, Lieutenant. It seemed that the words were spoken to me by someone, by *something* Outside."

"But this is only a Deep Freeze chamber, sir."

"It is only a Deep Freeze chamber—but it has too many doors."

"I can't see the second one."

"No. It is concealed. I found it only by accident. You see that panel? Take your screwdriver and remove the holding screws."

In spite of his unfamiliarity with power tools, with tools of any kind, Brasidus accomplished the job in a



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few seconds. Then, with Alessis' help, he prised the insulated panel out from the wall, lifted it to one side. There was a tunnel beyond it, high enough so that a tall man could walk without stooping, wide enough so that bulky burdens could be carried along it with ease. There were pipes and conduits on the roof of the tunnel, visible in the light of the torches.

"An alternative freezing system," explained Alessis. "Machinery in the Creche itself. I'm not supposed to know about it. The tunnel's insulated, too—and I've no doubt that when it's in use it can be brought down to well below Zero."

"And what am I supposed to do?" Brasidus asked.

"You take your orders from Captain Diomedes, not from me. You're supposed to snoop—that's all that I know. And if you *are* caught—I risk *my* neck by providing you with some sort of a cover story. You thought—and I though—that all these wires and pipes are supposed to be doing something. As, in fact, they are. Well, you'll find another door at the end. A proper one, and with dogs that can be operated from either side." His hand rested briefly on Brasidus' upper forearm. "I don't like this business. It's all too hasty; there's far too much last minute improvisation. So be careful."

"I'll try," Brasidus told him. He stuck the hammer and the screwdriver into his belt—after all, he was supposed to be a workman, and if it came to any sort of showdown they would be better than no weapons at all—and, without a backward glance, set off along the tunnel.

The door at the far end was easy enough to open, and the screw clamps were well greased and silent. With the thick, insulated valve the slightest crack ajar Brasidus listened. He could hear nothing. Probably there was nobody on the further side. He hoped. The door opened away from him into whatever space there was on the other side. It was a pity, as anybody waiting there—the possibility still had not been ruled out—would be hidden from Brasidus as he emerged. But if the door were flung open violently he would be not only hidden, but trapped.

Brasidus flung the door open violently, catching it just before it thudded noisily against the wall of the corridor.

So far, so good.

But what was there to see? Across the corridor there was yet another door, looking as though it, too, were insulated. And it was locked. To his left stretched the long, long passageway, soft ceiling lights reflected in the polished floor. To his right stretched another long, long passageway, similarly illuminated. On both sides there were doors, irregularly spaced, numbered.

Brasidus stood, silent and motionless, every sense tuned to a high pitch of sensitivity. There was the faintest hint of perfume in the air, merged with other hints—antiseptics, machinery, cooking; noticeable only by reason of its unusualness. A similar fragrance had lingered around Margaret Lazenby. And, remembered Brasidus, around that other Arcadian in this very building—Sally. And, oddly enough, around Heraklion. (Normally the only odors associated with Doctors were those of the various spirits and lotions of their trade.)



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*So,* he thought, *there are Arcadians here.*

*So,* he told himself, *I knew that already.*

*So what?*

His hearing was abnormally keen, and he willed himself to ignore the mutter of his own heartbeats. The sussurus of his respiration. From somewhere, faint and far away, drifted a murmur of machinery. There were voices, distant, and a barely heard tinkle of that silvery laughter he already associated with the Arcadians. There was a whisper of running water, evocative of a hillside rill rather than city plumbing.

He did not want to stray too far from the door, but realized that he would learn little, if anything, by remaining immobile. He turned to his left, mainly because that was the direction from which the Arcadian laughter and the faint splashing sounds were coming. He advanced slowly and cautiously, his hand hovering just clear of the haft of his hammer.

Suddenly a door opened. The man standing there was dressed in a long, soft, enveloping robe. He had long, blonde hair, and the fine features and the wide, red mouth of an Arcadian. There was about him—about *her,* Brasidus corrected himself—more than just a hint of that disturbing perfume. "Hello," she said in a high, pleasantly surprised voice. "Why, hello! A fresh face, as I live and breathe! And what are you doing in this abode of love?"

"I'm checking the refrigeration, sir."

"Sir!" There was a tinkling laughter, amused but not unkind. "Sir! That's a give-away, fellow. You don't belong here, do you?"

"Why, sir, no."

The Arcadian sighed. "Such a handsome brute—and I have to chase you off. But it's getting on for the time when our learned lovers join us for . . . er . . . aquatic relaxation in the pool. And if *they* find you wandering around where you shouldn't be . . ." She drew the edge of her hand across her throat in an expressive gesture. "It's happened before—and, after all, who misses a helot? But where did you come from? Oh, yes, I see. You could be a refrigeration mechanic . . . My advice to you is to get back into your hold and to pull it shut after you." Then she said, as Brasidus started to turn to retreat to the tunnel, "Not so fast, Buster. Not so fast." A slim hand, with red-painted nails, caught his right shoulder to swing him so that he faced her; the other hand came up to rest upon his left shoulder. Her face was very close to his, the lips parted.

As though it were the most natural thing in the world Brasidus kissed her. *Unnatural,* said a voice in his mind, flatly and coldly. *Unnatural, to mate with a monster from another world, even to contemplate such a sterile coupling. Unnatural. Unnatural.*

But his own arms were about her and he was returning her kiss—hotly, avidly, clumsily. That censor in his mind was, at the moment, talking only to itself. He felt the mounds of flesh on her chest pressing against him, was keenly aware of the softness of her thighs against his own.

Suddenly, somehow, her hands were between their upper bodies, pushing him away. With a twist of her head she disengaged her mouth. "Go, you fool!" she whispered urgently. "Go! If *they* find you they'll kill you. Go.



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Don't worry—I'll say nothing. And if you have any sense you'll not say anything either."

"But . . ."

"Go!"

Reluctantly, Brasidus went. Just as he closed the door he heard footsteps approaching along the alleyway.

But there was no alarm raised; his intrusion had been undetected.

Back in the Deep Freeze chamber Alessis looked at him curiously. "Have you been in a fight? Your mouth . . . There's blood."

Brasidus examined the back of his investigatory hand. "No," he said. "It's not blood. I don't know what it is."

"But what happened?"

"I don't know," replied Brasidus truthfully. Still he was not feeling the shame, the self-revulsion that should have been swamping him. "I don't know. In any case, I have to make my reports only to Captain Diomedes."

*To be concluded.*

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# FANTASY BOOKS
# FRITZ LEIBER

SPIRITS, STARS AND SPELLS, *The Profits and Perils of Magic*, by L. Sprague de Camp and Catherine C. de Camp (Canaveral Press, $5.95, 348 p., 37 illos.)

In these ultra-scientific times when an astrology pamphlet is usually the first item to be spotted on a newsstand, when thousands of flying-saucer cultists meet annually in the California desert, when there is a widespread desire to "believe in" extrasensory perception and psionics as if they were religions, when Timothy Leary spouts to thousands about dropping out from society and climbing down the ladder of the DNA molecule (fancied by him to be the carrier of primeval memories as well as heredity), when England is experiencing a return of witchcraft with solemn naked dances around bonfires, and when Anton LaVey has a satanist church complete with a 500-pound lion going full blast in San Francisco, it is high time for a book by competent scholars restating and extending the scientific arguments against the efficacy of magic, prophecy, necromancy, and other sorts of jiggery-pokery.

The de Camps first examine the primitive foundations of sorcery, which is the control of spirits, and sympathetic magic, which operates by the "laws" of similarity (to bring rain, urinate on the ground) and contagion (to blister an enemy's fingers, burn his nail-parings) and the two mixed (if you put into running water a knife that has cut a man, his wound will keep bleeding). Then they trace the historical development and cite modern instances of astrology, consultation of oracles, prophecy, witchcraft, alchemy, numerology, belief in fairyland, mesmerism (dubious parent of hypnotism), spiritualism, and theosophy. There are good portraits of Aleister Crowley, Madam Blavatsky, and many another great faker.

The de Camps don't pull their punches. The notion that "creatures from some other planet are keeping us under surveillance from saucer-shaped spacecraft" is dismissed with a curt "no element of truth" in this "night-blooming flower" of the imagination. They see through the pompous scholarship of the late Reverend Montague Summers to the paunchy, cold-blooded bigot who "wanted to revive the witch panic, complete with rack, thumbscrew, and stake," and conclude that, "although Summers' books make available a tremendous mass of information about witchcraft, his bloodthirsty fanaticism, tendentiousness, and special pleading render his conclusions worthless."

At the same time they cast very strong doubts on Margaret Alice Murray's popular theory that medieval



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witchcraft was a widespread, secret, nasty-nice religion, organized in covens, and holding black masses, though the de Camps allow that small groups may locally have practiced "half-remembered fertility rites handed down from pagan times" and this has been mistaken for witchcraft.

The authors can't even find anything good to say about Charles Fort and his "four books of curiosa" except that his "incompetent and scurrilous attack on astronomy would be amusing had not so many people taken it seriously."

Finally, they devote 12 pages to an enthusiastic expose of Christian Science, a subject notoriously avoided by most authors and publishers of books about crackpot cults. They lay bare its most unscientific underpinnings, its origins in mesmerism, the changes in the text of *Science and Health*—almost as many as the changes of name of Mary Baker Eddy—her despotic personal rule, her favorites (who always became enemies), her paranoid fears, the fact that she used morphine for decades, and the many scandals and feuds in the cult, resulting in charges of black magic and the formation of splinter groups such as New Thought.

The de Camps's sturdy moral stand is that "there are always people who want knowledge without study, health without self-discipline, wealth without work, safety without precautions, and, in general, happiness without earning it," and that these become the natural prey of charlatans.

If this sounds a bit stuff, I say, "Too bad!" We need more of this outlook in a culture uncritically obedient to advertising and propaganda, and falling dangerously in love with the irrational.

When the de Camps go on to say that "faith in oneself is the best kind of faith to cultivate," they can be legitimately challenged by the deeply religious and by those who have simply made the shattering discovery that there are situations with which even well-educated self cannot cope.

The *history* of magic remains the chiefest topic of this book. For a sharp, amusing, and detailed account of modern crackpot cults and pseudo-scientific theories, with a somewhat kindlier view of Fort, consult Martin Gardner's *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science* (Dover Publications). For science's own mistakes, *The Story of Human Error*, ed. by Joseph Jastrow (Appleton-Century) is still good. Everett Webber's *Escape to Utopia* (Hastings House) succinctly scans America's utopian experiments. Add thereto *Faiths, Cults & Sects of America from Atheism to Zen*, by Richard R. Mathison (Bobbs-Merrill), *The World of Flying Saucers* by Donald Menzel and Lyle Boyd (Doubleday) and *Sex in History* by G. Rattray Taylor (Ballantine Books) and one has a readable sound backbone for a skeptic's library.

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(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 112)

the most beautiful woman he had ever seen or would ever see—the woman he had loved and hoped to make his wife when the war was over—her eyes alight with love, her cheeks flushed with emotion, and two pointed fangs protruding below her gleaming, faultless teeth, dripping redly with blood from two painful incisions they had made on his lower lip.

The End



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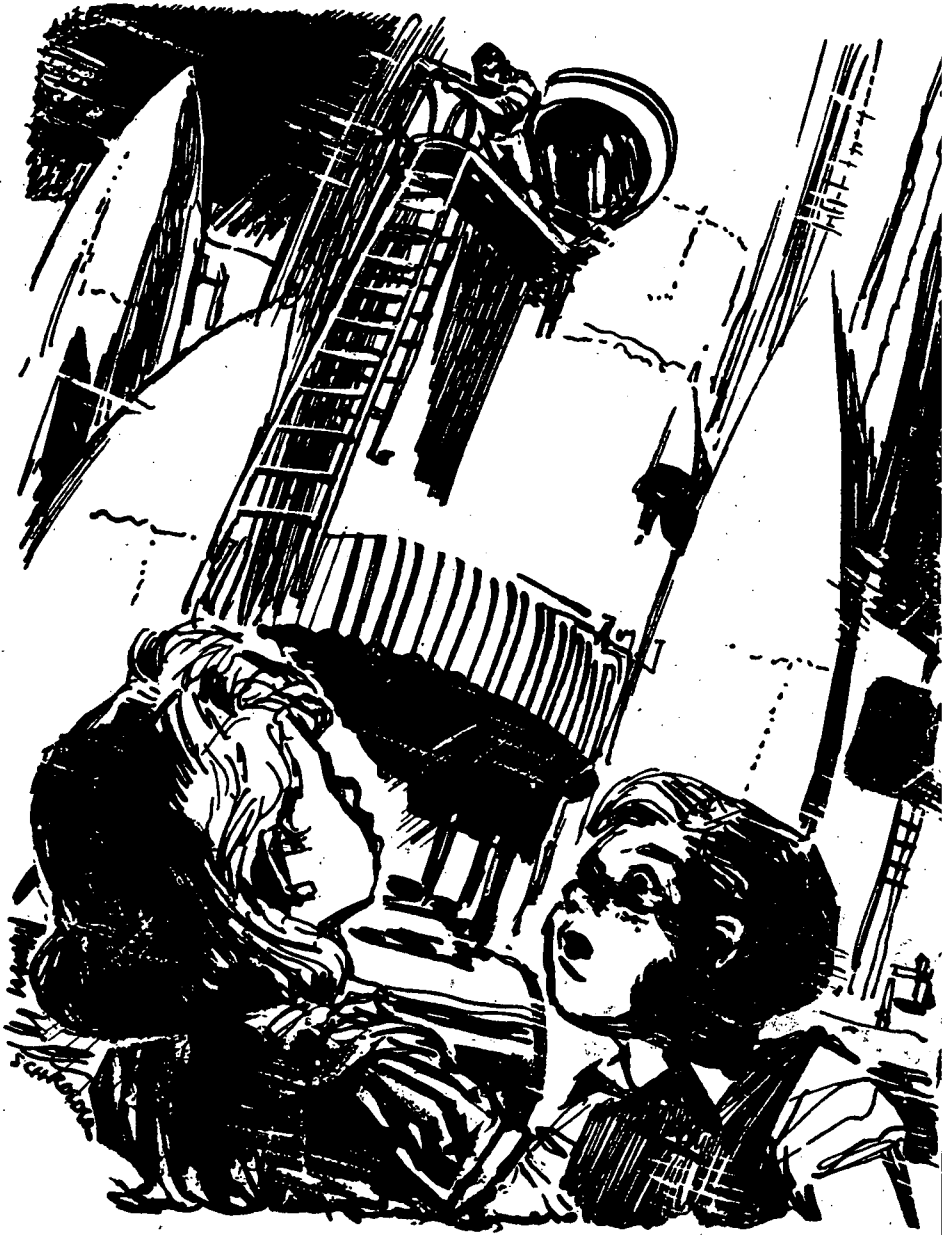
*Illustrator:* Ernest Schroeder





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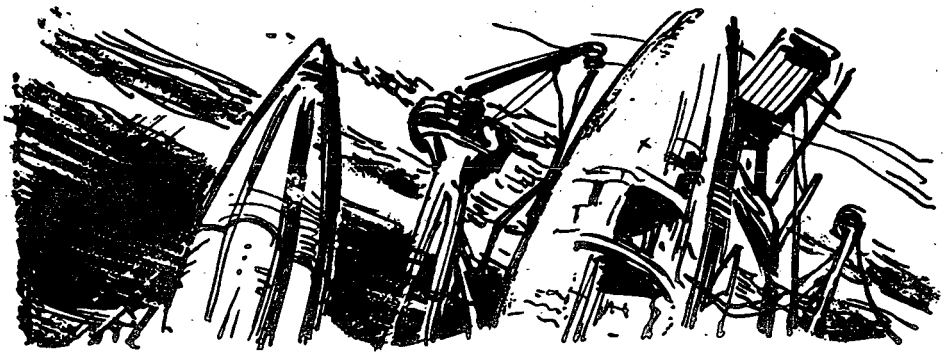

# I LOVE LUCIFER

BY WILLIAM P. McGIVERN

*Her parents must have been kidding. Who ever heard of naming a sweet, beautiful little girl* Lucifer? *If she had been some nauseous brat right out of the Brimstone Heights section of Hell, you could understand it. But actually she was just the opposite and as smart as you could want.*

*Maybe that was her trouble. . . .*

"HI," said the little girl.

She was about four-feet tall, with silky blonde hair and big blue eyes. Her face was very pretty, grave and delicate at once, and her clothes had been chosen by someone who had known how to flatter her fragile beauty. She wore a pale blue dress, starched and immaculate, with a full skirt that flared out over a white ruffled petticoat. There was a black bow in her hair that neatly matched her tiny, black patent-leather pumps, and her short white socks were almost as white as her childishly slim legs.

"Well, well," the old man said putting down his newspaper and looking at her with a surprised smile. He had been sitting in the sun, surrounded by space and

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silence, his chair tilted back against the wall of a small, stoutly-constructed house. Before him spread the fantastic beauty of a space-ship dump — dozens of acres of tall gleaming ships, moored here permanently, their slim noses pointing upward to the great reaches of space they would never know again.

"Say, where'd you come from?" he asked, shifting around in his chair to face her. His name was John Logan and he had been the caretaker of this space-ship cemetery for twenty-six years; and this was the first time he had entertained such an improbable visitor.

"I came from the city," the little girl said in a sweet low voice.

The city was five miles away, old John knew. "I'll be darned," he said, chuckling. "Did you walk?"

She looked away from him and sighed. "Well, yes," she said patiently, in the voice children use to relegate adult teasing to its proper low status.

"Your Mommy's going to be worried about you," old John said, a trifle concerned.

"I suppose," she said, facing it practically. "But I wanted to come so I came. I'll be back in time for dinner if I don't stay too long."

"Well, you're mighty welcome," old John said. "It's just that I don't want your folks worrying."

"Oh, well," she said matter-of-factly, dismissing the idea. "Can I play here?"

"Sure," old John said. "Johnny!" he called. "Come out here. We got a pretty little visitor."

The door of the house opened and a sturdy, apple-cheeked boy appeared. He was about five, with taffy-colored hair which needed cutting, and a span of freckles running from one cheekbone across a snub nose. His eyes were full of shy wonder as he stared at the small, fragile girl.

"This here's Johnny," old John said to the girl. "He don't see many people so he's apt to be bashful with you for a while. What's your name?"

"Lucifer," she said.

Old John grinned. "That ain't no name for a pretty little girl."

"Well, it's my name anyway."

"I ain't quarelling with you about it," old John said. "But what's your other name. I mean the one you're Mommy and Daddy call you by."

"Lucifer," she told him patiently.

His shrewd gambit having failed, old John gave up. "All right, Lucifer it is," he said.

The little girl took a red rubber ball from her pocket and began bouncing it on the ground. "Come on, let's play," she said to Johnny.

But Johnny pressed closer to old John's leg and stared at her



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in silence. His fat little fingers twitched with excitement as he watched her bounce the ball up and down, but his expression was confused and shy.

"I told you he don't see many people," old John said apologetically.

This was true, of course, and it was a great source of worry to the old man. He was Johnny's grandfather; both the boys parents were dead, and it was his task to raise him. And he wasn't doing a very good job, he knew. He dressed him and fed him and saw to it that he got his rest, but his work kept him out here at the cemetery seven days a week and he couldn't provide much companionship for the little boy. Not that he didn't try; but no adult can play satisfactorily with children. The child soon realizes that an adult on his knees playing with blocks and toy soldiers is no substitute for the real thing, which is a real child.

"He'll get used to you after a while," said old John hopefully.

"Sure he will," the little girl said, and went on bouncing her red rubber ball. "It's just because he's so young."

Johnny looked at her for a moment and then sat down and with elaborate indifference began drawing a circle on the ground with a twig. "I'm not young," he said earnestly to a crawling ant.

The little girl played around on the concrete platform that stretched along in front of old John's house and the small storage building which adjoined it. Once she ventured twenty or thirty yards away and stared at the hulls of the great ships which were moored in orderly rows about a city block from old John's house. But she soon returned to continue her games in the more immediate vicinity of old John and his grandson. Finally, as the sun began to settle in the sky, she said regretfully, "Well, I'd better be starting home. May I come here and play tomorrow?"

"Of course, but I don't want your folks worrying about you."

"Well, I'll come then." She marched over to Johnny and handed him the red ball. "You can play with this, if you like."

Johnny took it shyly from her and followed her with his eyes as she marched out the gate and started across the field. On his earnest, pudgy face was an expression of pure adoration.

She came to play at the spaceship cemetery every afternoon that week, and by the third day Johnny was following her about like a puppy. He had never been so happy; after lunch he stood at the gate waiting for her to appear at the top of the hill, fidgeting with impatience. A dozen times a minute he would pester his grand-



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father with questions. "Is she coming?" "Really coming?" "Will she always come to play with us?" "How soon will she be here?" "Can't she live with us?"

And when she appeared, marching down the hill, a tiny, perfect figure against the sky, he would race to meet her, whooping and hollering with joy.

She had a wonderful, imaginative way with him. She taught him an intricate version of hopscotch, which they played in the long shadows of the great ships. He was clumsy as a young puppy in his attempts to hop from square to square in the approved sequence, while she was as surefooted and gracious as a deer. But she never teased him or made fun of him; when he lost his balance or tripped, she would say kindly, "Well, you almost made it, Johnny. You're getting better all the time."

And she told him endless stories and built toy cities for him and made him a pirate's hat from a handkerchief and the black ribbon from her hair.

Eventually they began cautiously exploring the avenues formed by the rows of silent, gleaming ships.

Old John was a bit apprehensive about this and gave them a stern warning about penetrating too far into the maze of derelict space craft. The little girl assured him solemnly that they would be most careful, but once out of his sight she airily ignored his injunctions. She had a knack of direction and could make half-a-dozen turns and remember each one when she started back. Little Johnny never knew where he was once he lost sight of the house. He trotted happily beside her, listening to her stories, staring at the big ships, as carefree as a wandering bird.

The little girl had an orderly process of investigation. She roamed the great stretch of ground from left to right, going in deeper each day.

"We must see it all," she told Johnny firmly.

"But it's all alike," he said, not caring one way or the other as long as they were together.

"But you can't be sure it's all alike until you've seen it all," she insisted.

"Really?" Johnny said, awed by this logic.

They walked hand-in-hand through the wide empty lanes between the hulls of the giant ships, chatting in their piping, children's voices, occasionally halting to stare upward at the slender noses that pierced the sky hundreds of feet above their heads.

Finally, after two weeks of exploration, they reached the back of the huge yard, which was the farthest point from the house. It was quiet there, and the light was



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blocked off by the shadows of the towering ships.

"Well, I guess we'd better go back," she said.

"All right," Johnny said. "Let's go home and play bridge and trains."

"That's what we'll do," she said. Then she cried, "Oh look," and pointed to an object on the ground.

"What?" he said.

"There, right there!" She squatted down and picked up a shred of tobacco in her tiny fingers. Johnny squatted beside her and looked at it with round, solemn eyes. He saw no significance in this half-inch of tobacco but he was interested in anything which interested Lucifer.

"That's what Grampa smokes," he said wisely.

"But he never comes back here, does he?"

"No, he doesn't."

The little girl wriggled her shoulders with excitement. "That means someone else was here," she said.

Johnny wriggled his shoulders, too, excited because she was. "Yeah," he said. "Somebody else was here."

"Who could it be?" she cried happily. "We must find them, Johnny."

Johnny looked around and saw no one. "How can we find them?"

"We'll search until we do," she said, in the same high, excited voice. "And we'll tell your Grampa and make him help us. Oh, it will be such fun."

"Such fun," Johnny repeated the words, laughing.

Above their heads a lock clicked and the sound of it cracked through the shadowed silence. They looked up and saw a door swing open on the ramp of one of the ships. A man in a leather jacket stepped out on the platform and smiled down at them. "Hello, kids," he said. "Did you get lost?"

"No, we aren't lost," the little girl said. "We were just going home when we found some tobacco."

The man laughed. "You've got sharp eyes, haven't you? But don't go yet. I'm coming down." He pulled a small lever on the hull of the ship and a ladder emerged from the base of the platform and sank swiftly to the ground. They stared without fear as he descended the ladder. He was a big man, with black hair and a black smudge of whiskers along his heavy jawline, and alert, dancing eyes. They didn't fear him because they were the end products of a society which had almost completely eliminated evil. Wars, murders, cruelty — these things were unknown to them; the few unregenerates who still lusted for violence were detected by solar police and quarantined on distant asteroids. For this reason the



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little boy and the little girl watched the man without anxiety as he approached and sank down on his haunches beside them. People were good, they knew. The bad people were sent away and never bothered anybody. Therefore this man must be good; otherwise he would not be free.

"What were you looking for down here?" he asked them.

"We were exploring," the little girl said. "We didn't think we'd find any people though. It's very exciting, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is," the man said. "My name is Dan, by the way."

"We're pleased to meet you, Dan," she said gravely.

The man studied their small, alert faces for a few seconds, smiling thoughtfully. "I heard you mention Grampa. Who would that be?"

"That's Johnny's grandfather."

"The caretaker?"

"That's right. I think we must be going," she said. "It was fun talking to you. But he'll be worried about us."

"Wait just a second," Dan said, rubbing a hand along his dark jaw-line. The smile on his lips was strained and hard. "I want to tell you a secret."

"I love secrets," the little girl said, her eyes dancing.

"I love secrets too," Johnny said laughing.

"Well, okay. You're the only two people in the whole world who know that I'm here. That's a big secret, isn't it?"

"It sure is," she said.

"Now you must keep the secret," he said. "You can't tell anyone you saw me, understand?"

"Why not?" she asked him gravely.

"Because then it wouldn't be a secret anymore," he said. "Do you see?"

"Well, in a way," the little girl said, tilting her head to one side and frowning. "But it isn't an important secret, I don't think."

"That's where you're wrong," he said, speaking in a low impressive voice. "It's terribly important. If anyone knew I was here it would cause the greatest trouble you can imagine."

"What trouble?"

"That's one thing I can't tell you. But I will someday, if you promise me now not to tell anyone you saw me. Will you promise?"

The little girl looked undecided and the man watched her with narrowed eyes. Then she said, "All right, I promise."

"Me too," said Johnny.

"Good, fine," the man said, letting out his breath slowly.

"Can we come to see you again?" she asked him.

"Yes, if you don't tell anyone about me," he said. "Not even his Grampa."



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"We won't," she said. "We promise. Come on now, Johnny, we must go. Goodby, Dan."

"Goodby, kids."

"Goodby, Dan," Johnny yelled and ran after the little girl.

Dan watched them skipping off, tiny, unreal figures in the shadows thrown by the great hulls, and then he rubbed his jaw again and ascended the ladder to the platform where he had first appeared. When he looked down they had vanished from his sight; there was nothing below him but the silence and the wide empty streets.

Dan opened the hatchway and walked into the lighted interior of the vast ship. He walked down a bright companionway and turned into a room whose metal walls were covered with dials and control panels. A man sat there behind a desk working on a graph with a sextant. He was small, neatly built, with thick, graying hair and a lined, unrevealing face. The only expression was in his restless, irritable eyes. "Well," he said, without looking up. "Where've you been? Outside?"

"Yeah, outside," Dan said, seating himself and facing the smaller man across the desk. "Taking my evening constitutional, Willie."

The man called Willie looked up sharply then, his eyes hot and angry. "You know that's against orders, don't you?"

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"Sure, sure," Dan said easily. "But listen a minute. I heard voices outside and I took a look. We had some visitors."

Willie jumped to his feet so quickly that his chair fell over backward with a crash. "Who were they? Did they see you?" he demanded.

"Sure, I talked with them," Dan said, smiling. "Now calm down. They were a pair of kids. The caretaker's grandson and a funny, dressed-up little girl."

"And you let them get away?"

"Be sensible. If we held them the place would be crawling with people looking for them. So I made them promise me they wouldn't tell anyone about meeting me."

"You took a big chance on our lives."

"Don't worry. Relax. Those kids are going to solve our problem."

The little girl and Johnny stopped at the base of a ship almost within sight of the house. That is, she stopped and Johnny followed suit automatically. She looked gravely at him and said, "You understand that we aren't going to tell, don't you?"

"Sure," he said.

"Even if someone asks us?"

Johnny looked up at her, his round, pink-cheeked face settling into a frown. "But, we'd have to tell if we're asked. We can't lie."

"It isn't lying," she said firmly. "It's just not telling the truth."

"There's no difference," he said stubbornly. He looked very unhappy; disagreeing with her on any point made him feel sad. But he knew lying was bad. Just as bad as stealing or cheating.

"If you tell, I'll never play with you again," she said, staring intently at him with her bold blue eyes. "Do you understand? I'll take my red ball home with me tonight, and I'll never, never come back."

Johnny began to cry. "Don't say that," he pleaded with her. "I won't tell, honest. Say you'll come back tomorrow, please."

"All right," she said, relenting. "Dry your eyes. I'll come and play with you as long as you don't tell."

"I'll never tell," he said, his breath catching unevenly.

They resumed their customary routine the following afternoon, playing with the ball, hopping about the hop-scotch squares, running with shrieks through the cool, pleasant sunlight.

They didn't go exploring among the ships, however.

Everything went on as usual for a few days, and then came an interruption. A small airplane settled down at the front gate and a neatly-dressed young man climbed and strolled over to say hello to John Logan. He had pleasant,



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sun-tanned features, and an air of casual good humor about him; but his steady brown eyes were unusually sharp and observant.

He opened a wallet and showed old John his credentials from the Inter-Planetary Service. Old John started to climb to his feet but the young man said, "Don't bother," with a quick little smile. "It's too hot to do much but keep comfortable. How's everything? About as usual?"

"Yes, about as usual," old John said.

"Any strangers around?"

"No, haven't seen any."

"I wouldn't imagine they'd come here," the young man said absently, speaking to himself and not old John. "They'll try for a base where the ships are modern and still armed."

"What's that?" old John asked him.

"Nothing," the young man smiled.

Just then the little girl and Johnny came running around the corner, squealing with excitement.

"Well, well," the young man said, grinning after them. "Whose are those?"

"The boy is my grandson, and the little girl comes over to play with him," old John said.

"I see," the young man said, smiling thoughtfully. "Where does she come from?"

"The city. Says she walks. I expect her father drops her from his plane just over the field."

"I think I'll join their game," the young man said. "Nothing like playing with kids to keep you young. Go on with your paper; I can find them."

The young man strolled around in back of the warehouse that adjoined old John's house, where his ears had told him the kids were playing. They were seated on the ground, making pictures from leaves, bits of paper and twigs.

"Well, well, a pair of artists," he said, studying their work with his friendly, observant eyes.

"This is a picture of the man," Johnny said.

"Very handsome. What man?"

"The man in —" Johnny stopped and stared solemnly at his shoes. "Any old man," he said.

The young man didn't appear to notice the break in Johnny's reply. He smiled at the little girl who was watching him gravely. "It must be fun playing around here," he said.

"That's why we do it," she said logically.

He laughed and sat down on the ground. "Grown-ups talk pretty foolishly, don't they?"

"Sometimes," she said, turning away shyly.

"Tell me this have you ever played among the ships?"

"Oh yes, we go all over the yard," she said. "That's fun."

"Have you ever seen anyone



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fooling around out there?"

"No."

He looked at Johnny, smiling quizically. "How about you?"

"How about me what?" Johnny asked him, puzzled.

"Have you ever seen anyone when you were playing among the ships?"

Johnny looked down at his shoes, his lip beginning to tremble. "You heard her," he said. "She said she didn't see nobody."

"I'm asking you now," the young man said gently. "But don't answer right away. I want to tell you first why I'm here. Now both of you know what happens to bad people, don't you? They're put away on asteroids and kept there until we think it's safe for them to return. We try to help them all we can, but there are some who won't be helped. They're very bad men, cruel, violent, and evil, with no respect for other people. They will steal and kill if we let them out, so we don't let them out. But once in a great while these men are cunning enough to get away. That's very serious, of course, and each planet cooperates in finding them and putting them away once again. Do you understand me?"

The little girl nodded, watching him intently, and Johnny nodded too.

"Good," he said. "Well, two men have got away and I'm trying to find them. Not only I, but dozens of agents from all the other planets have joined in the search. These two men are very dangerous and if we don't find them they'll hurt someone. We think they are on Earth, and we know their intention is to get away from Earth and establish themselves on some remote asteroid or planetoid. They need a space ship, naturally and that's why we're investigating all these old yards. They just might try to equip an obsolete ship and make an escape in it." He paused, studying Johnny's unhappy little face. "Now do you understand how serious this is?"

Johnny nodded sullenly.

"Well, have you seen anyone in the yards? If you have, you must tell me. The man you saw might be one of these very bad men, and we must find them before they do a lot of damage. Did you see anyone, Johnny?"

Johnny looked away from him, fighting back tears. The little girl bounced her rubber ball up and down, watching him with cool blue eyes.

"I didn't see anybody," Johnny said in a low voice. "If I saw someone I'd tell you."

"Why are you so upset? What's troubling you, Johnny?"

Johnny turned to him eagerly, responding to the gentle friendliness in his voice, but the little girl said quickly, "It's all that about the bad men. It's frightened him.



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And it frightened me too, mister."

"Was that it?" the young man asked Johnny.

"Yes, I guess so," he said, after a little pause. "That was it, I guess."

The young man got to his feet. "Well, if you see anyone, you tell your grandfather." He stared at the little girl for a moment or so, frowning uneasily, and then he said goodby to them and walked around to where old John was sitting in the sun.

Johnny looked at the little girl with a piteous frown on his face. "Why did you make me lie?" he whispered. "It makes me feel so bad."

"Would you like me to go away and never come back?" she said, looking up at the sky and tossing the ball in the air.

"No, Lucy. Don't go away from me."

"I won't, I promise."

Dan and Willie sat in the control room of the space ship, facing each other across the chart desk. Between them stood a small bottle with about half a dozen pills in it.

"One day's ration," Willie said, staring at Dan with hot, bitter eyes. "We got to make our move. I didn't crash out just to starve to death."

Dan pounded a fist into the palm of his hand. "Where in hell are those kids?"

"Maybe they'll never come back. You and your bright ideas."

"They've got to," Dan said, but his voice lacked conviction. "Kids are naturally curious. Maybe they're busy with some other game but pretty soon they'll remember this place and come back."

"Yeah? Are you sure they can find it?"

"Well, they found it once."

Willie stared at the bottle of food ration pills. "Everything is set and we're stuck because of a pair of kids. Power plant, communications, everything's set. But no igniter."

"We'll get it."

Willie stood up and began to pace the floor. "I say let's take it," he said. "Beat the old man over the head and take it."

"Very smart, very shrewd," Dan said sarcastically. "By the time we got back and installed it they'd be on our necks. These junk yards may look like country stores but they're booby-trapped like banks. That's why they only need one guard."

Two days later the little girl and Johnny once again penetrated into the depths of the space dump. It was obvious from Johnny's little face that a change had taken place in their relationship. He still adored her but there was a hint of guilt and worry in his expression, very out of place on his round childish face.



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"Now let me see," the little girl said, pausing at an intersection, and putting a dainty fist under her chin. "I think it was this way. That's it, I'm sure. Come on, Johnny."

She led surely from one wide lane to another, until finally she reached the spot where they had found the tendril of tobacco. Looking up at the platform of the ship, she called out, "Dan! Hello, Dan."

The door opened with a click and Dan stared down at them from the railing of the platform. His face was pale and gaunt, but he was grinning with excitement. "Well, well, I was hoping you kids would show up. How would you like to come inside and see what a ship looks like."

"That would be thrilling," the little girl said, wriggling her shoulders with anticipation. "Thank you so much."

Johnny was excited too; but beneath it was the persistent tug of guilt. "Grampa told us never to go into the ships," he said.

"Oh, don't be silly," the little girl said. "He'll never find out."

The ladder swooped down at them and the little girl ran eagerly up to the platform, her grave, delicate face working with excitement. Johnny followed reluctantly.

Inside Dan led them through shining companionways to the chart room where he introduced them with a flourish to Willie.

"We're pleased to meet you," the little girl said, sedately.

Johnny looked from one man to the other, his eyes widening with anxiety.

"He's just bashful," the little girl said. "Don't worry, he'll get over it."

Johnny said defiantly, "They're the two bad men, Lucy. They're the ones the good man told us about."

Willie, his eyes blazing with anger, took a step toward the little boy, but Dan stopped him with a heavy hand against his chest. "Now, relax," he said, smiling at the little girl. "Who is this 'good man' he's talking about?"

"That was a man who came a couple of days ago," the little girl said. "He told us about some bad men who had run away. He was looking for them."

"Did you tell him about me?"

"Oh, no. That was a secret."

"Now listen to me," Dan said, kneeling and putting his big hands on her thin arms. "Those bad men are trying to find us. That's why we're hiding. If they find us they'll kill us. Do you understand that?"

The little girl wet her lips. "Yes, but I'm scared."

"There's nothing to be frightened of," Dan said softly. "But you've got to help us. Otherwise these bad men will find us and kill us. Will you help us? You



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don't want us to be killed, do you?"

"No," the little girl said quickly.

"All right. We've got to get away in this ship. But we don't have an igniter to start it. Do you know what that is?"

The little girl shook her head.

Willie turned away and muttered something under his breath. Dan paid no attention to him; his hard, direct eyes were focused intently on the little girl's. "Now please listen very carefully," he said. "And igniter is a tube about six inches long, and its solid black in color. There are two kinds. One is for very short trips, like if you just wanted to move this ship from one mooring tower to another. The other is long range. Now we need the long range igniter, and there are some in the warehouse next to your Grampa's house."

"He's not her Gramps, he's mine," Johnny said sullenly.

"Do you understand this so far?" Dan said, ignoring the boy.

"Yes, I understand," she said.

"Very well. You're a smart little girl. I knew that right away. Now I'll tell you where to find the igniter we want. This is real important. When you get into the warehouse . . ."

"The next thing is how to get into the warehouse," Dan said, after he had described in detail the location of the igniters. "That's going to take some planning, because we can't let your Grampa know what we're doing. Otherwise the bad men would kill him too. Do you see that?"

"I can get into the warehouse," the little girl said proudly. "I've watched Gramps do it ever so often."

"How?" Dan asked, watching her shrewdly.

"Well, there's a box in his house with levers in it. He pulls a lever and the door of the warehouse opens. But he can only pull it at a certain time, or else a message goes out somewhere and warns somebody that it isn't Grampa pulling the lever but somebody else."

"I see you've got a good pair of eyes," Dan said, with a glance of amused triumph at Willie.

"And also," the little girl said in the same proud voice, "he has to keep his hand inside the box a certain length of time before he takes it out. Otherwise, if he didn't, *that* would send out a message too."

"Some kind of an electric eye and radar business with a timer on it," Dan said, nodding at Willie. Then he looked searchingly at the little girl. "Can you do this while your Grampa is taking a nap or something?"

"I think so," she said.

"You don't want the bad men to kill him, do you?"

"Oh, no."



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"Well, be careful then. Be sure he's asleep. Now do you have any questions? You know where the igniter is, and you know where the short-term ones are. Get into the warehouse, grab a long-termer and get back here as fast as you can. All right?"

"Yes, we'll hurry."

A short distance from the house the little girl stopped and looked sternly at Johnny, who was weeping. "You know what to tell your Grandfather, don't you?"

"Don't make me lie to him, Lucy."

"You must."

"They're bad men. You're helping them get away. And you're making me lie again."

"Do you want me to go away and never come back?"

"No, but I don't want to be bad."

"Very well. What will you tell your Grandfather?"

The little boy gulped and drew a trembling breath. "That I fell down and that's why I've been crying."

"And what else?"

"That I want to rest for a while, and for him to read to me."

"Good, don't forget any of it," the little girl said.

Old John was alarmed to see his grandson crying. When he heard what had happened he took the boy inside and gave him a glass of milk. He was greatly surprised when Johnny told him he wanted to lie down and have a story read to him; that just wasn't like the boy. But he led him upstairs to his room, made him comfortable with a pillow, and began to read to him in his slow, patient voice.

Downstairs the little girl walked to the cabinet against the wall, opened it and stared solemnly at a panel of levers. Then she glanced at a clock above the mantle, her lips moving silently, and stood perfectly still for several moments. Drawing a deep breath at last she reached quickly into the cabinet and pulled a lever. She held onto it for ten seconds, then withdrew her hand and ran outside. The main door of the warehouse stood open. Smiling happily, the little girl darted inside, as quick as a bird on the wing. . . .

"Johnny!" she called later in her sweet high voice. "Johnny, are you feeling better?"

She stood before old John's house, her feet turned inward, her small golden head tilted to one side, a picture of innocent childhood. The two bulges in her pockets were obscured by the way she was hugging herself with her thin arms.

"Johnny!" she called again. "Come out and play."

The little boy came quickly through the door, his grandfather trailing after him with a worried little frown on his little-boy face.



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"I guess he's chipper enough," old John said. "But he acts like he hurt more than his knee with that fall."

"I'll make him happy again," the little girl said. "Come on, Johnny, let's play."

"I don't want to play," he said.

"Don't be such a goose. Come on."

Holding his hand she drew him reluctantly toward the rows of great ships.

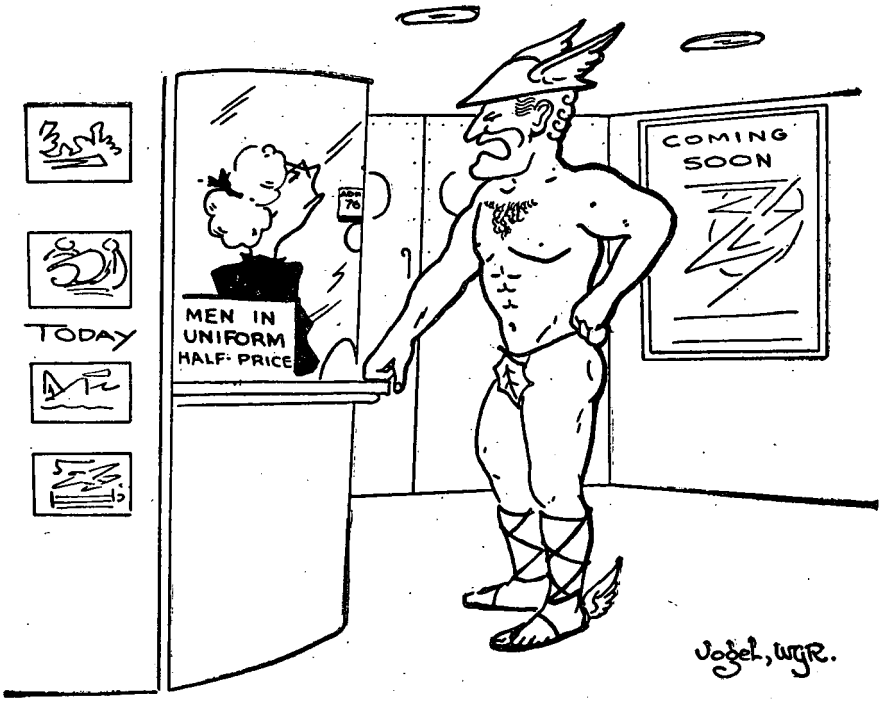
Dan was waiting on the platform of the ship with Willie. The two men stood perfectly still, staring down at the empty street. Only their eyes gave away their inner desperation.

"You better be right," Willie said.

"It'll work, it's got to work," Dan said. "She's a smart little gal. In fifteen or twenty years we could use her."

"You got faith in the future, eh?"

"I haven't lost it. We'll blast-off here and find a spot. And find others like us. And we'll live like




"But lady — this IS my uniform!"



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we want, fight like we want. Don't worry, we got futures."

Suddenly they heard the little girl's voice, and the figures of the children came into sight around the corner formed by the hull of the adjoining ship.

"We got it, Dan," the little girl cried, waving at the two men.

"Get inside and get ready," Dan snapped to Willie. "I told you we had futures." He ran down the ladder and grabbed the igniter cylinder from the little girl's hands. "Thanks, kid," he said, looking at both of them with his narrowed, thoughtful eyes.

"You're welcome," the little girl said. "We must hurry back now."

"Just a minute," Dan said smiling thoughtfully at her. "I got a little present for you in the ship."

"Oh, goodie," the little girl said, clapping her hands together happily. "You hear, Johnny? We can show it to the man?"

"What man?" Dan snapped.

"The one I told you about the other day," the little girl said patiently. "The one asking us about you. He was ever so nice. And he came back today. We're playing a game with him now. It's called hide-and-seek. Would you like to play?"

Dan looked quickly up and down the shadowed street, then turned and ran back up the ladder. He disappeared into the ship and the door closed behind with a soft rush of power.

"They're going away now," Johnny said, sobbing. "You helped them, Lucy. They're bad and you're bad too."

The ship suddenly trembled and moved upward from the ground. It hovered fifty feet in the air and glowing lights appeared in the cones of the rear propulsion rockets.

"You've helped them get away," Johnny said, weeping and stamping his feet on the ground. His round, apple-cheeked face was frantic with misery. "You're bad, Lucy! I hate you!"

The little girl caught him to her and hugged him with her thin arms. "No, don't say that," she cried softly. Her eyes followed the ship as it roared out of the atmosphere, trailing a crimson train of hot, blue-white fire in its wake.

"Daddy!"



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"Let me go, I hate you," Johnny cried. He pulled away from her but she caught him once more and forced the red rubber ball into his chubby hands. "Keep this, Johnny, please."

But the little ball meant nothing to him now. He threw it away and ran down the street, his fat little legs taking him away from her forever; his eyes were blind with tears.

The little girl stared after him through the growing darkness. She looked tiny and lost among the towers formed by the great ships. Then, sighing, she turned and walked in the opposite direction. When she came to a ship whose landing ladder was down, she went aboard and marched to the control room. Opening a heavy, lead-lined door she thrust a black cylinder into an empty receptacle, and then sat down facing the flight panels and visiscreens. She spread her skirt out prettily and then threw two switches.

The ship began to hum with power.

She spoke one word. "Venus."

A voice answered. "We have you here. Results?"

"Excellent," she said. "They've blasted-off with a short-term igniter. I expect they'll explode within an hour. See you at 22-xc. I'll be on the usual pattern."

"Any trouble at all?"

She hesitated. Then: "No, nothing at all. I gave them a short-term igniter and kept a good one for myself. I could have had help from Earth but this seemed less dangerous."

The little girl sighed softly as she looked out for the last time across the spires of the moored ships. Then she threw another switch and the ship began to move. . . .

Old John and the young man from Inter-Planetary Service found little Johnny wandering hysterically through the maze of ships an hour or so later. By that time the young man knew what had happened and was very sheepish about it.

"Yes, I'm sure she's good," he said, much later to the little boy. This was about the fiftieth time he'd said it. "I found out she was an agent, just like me, but from Venus. I'll never live this one down if I get to be a thousand. She's good, all right!"

"Good," Johnny said, laughing. He stared at the sky, pure adoration in his eyes. "I love you, Lucy," he shouted. "I did all the time." And he was thinking about where he had thrown the little red rubber ball, and wondering if he could find it in the morning.

Somehow he was sure he could.



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(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 73)

Its edges turned grey, and the paper flaked away into a powdery dust, and the dust blew across the maple table and settled to the floor. I had seen only that there must have been at least two hundred lines there, most of them in blurred, watery green fluid.

One line I remembered, seeing it the instant the paper disappeared. It was a line toward the bottom of the sheet.

*"To tempt the dangerous deep, while total darkness overspreads the skies . . ."*

I returned home, shaking as if with a fever. I knew it had all happened, and I began remembering the words Vacameth the Saracen. When I went to sleep again, waking, this would all be forgotten. But none of it mattered. Nothing mattered but that poem.

Had it been finished? The paper I had brought back had contained a great many new lines. But if it had been completed, Coleridge would have returned to his own time, and compleated it then. I was too far gone to think any more . . .

And so, tonight, I have been sitting here and writing all of this down, before Vacameth's prophecy, which I have so far cheated, can come true. I don't know what to do. I feel too tired now.

Here, Eric's manuscript seemed to come to an end, but there were two more sheets. I lit another cigarette and continued reading. Marshall was hunched over in his chair, waiting for the next sheets.

"It is almost three weeks since I wrote the pages which have preceded this. When I woke up that next morning and found them, they were completely new to me. I had no memory of ever having written them, though they were obviously in my hand, nor did I remember anything in them. From reading them, however, it appeared that Vacameth's prophecy had indeed come true.

"But since then I have been back several times, four or five at least, I can't be sure any more. Each time it seemed to me that it had been the first. I knew of the preceding times only by the evidence of this manuscript. Once I had actually started writing it down again when I found these pages and saw it had been written already.

"Each time has been like the other to the slightest detail, except for one time. I keep returning to that day when I met Coleridge on the pathway charging down on us. It is all the same. Instead of Coleridge being there alone now, lost as a prisoner in time, I am there with him when I come, and we go through the larger cycle. We return to his yesterdays until I think of the new way. Then we go through his meeting with Kalay and our flight, and the duel with Sevasta.

"But I never know I am doing what I have done before. I know that only when I return. Then I find these pages, and these lines that you see at the bottom of this page. Each line represents one of the times that I have returned and found this manuscript, and the tale which is fresh in my mind already written and waiting for me. If only there was some way I could remember . . . perhaps, I could try to change things again. But it seems impossible. The moment I tell Vacameth that I have what I came for, I return.

"I have gone back to that time



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from various places, from my own room, from a walk on the campus, and I have returned to find myself having continued whatever I was doing in this time. Once I started to light a cigarette; I had gone through the events of the three days—or was it two—and returned and less than a second had gone by for I was just taking the first drag and putting out the match. There is no correspondence in the passage of time. I have been away for as much as two hours, while here I evidently was carrying on.

"It is only this realization of the fact that this has happened a number of times, and which I know only from this manuscript and the lines on it, that enables me to work out a partial solution of what must happen there. It is that Coleridge does not return to his own age in time, because, as Vacameth told him, one returns only when one's reason for having come is satisfied. It seems to me now that Coleridge could not have finished his poem. He never had a chance to answer my question when I asked him about it, because Vacameth came in: Had he answered that the poem was unfinished I might not have felt ready to leave. But it could not have been finished, or Coleridge too would have left.

"And now I understand Vacameth's fear, for once I returned to the days of the Khan at a time when Coleridge had gone. Years must have passed since that day when I met him. The Court of Time was gone. I learned this from a frightened shepherd, who told me that the city of Kanbalu was a hundred miles to the south. He told me that the Court of Time had been destroyed by Kublai because of the murder of a mighty Prince. And, he said, we were standing not far from the spot where the Khan's soldiers had caught an aged Saracen, fleeing from the Court, and put him to death.

"So that is what must have happened. In the end, Vacameth's work was lost because I killed Sevasta that night. Vacameth had good reason to fear the link that bound me to Coleridge; it was the link that he sought and could not find.

"And this too I might be able to change if I could remember having been there when I return. But I cannot remember, and each time I come back, the memory of even this time, which should be fresh and alive, grows dimmer. If I did not have these pages, I might not even know that this had happened at all. I have come to depend upon them.

"These last few days I have been talking more openly of this maddening thing that has happened to me. On two different occasions I began telling my class about it. They took it as humor, but the second time I could see that they were beginning to wonder. I have heard that people around the campus are talking about me. I look like a wild man half the time, and sometimes I guess I sound a little incoherent. I've tried to tell Marshall about it, but he says pooh-pooh, and why don't I stop working so hard.

"But it isn't that, Pete. You must believe me. This really happened, and it keeps happening. I know there is a lot I can't explain. Why do I understand all those languages? What happens to that white robe I wear? Why are there never bloodstains on my coat when I return? Why can I never remember what the Princess Kalay looked like? If only that little wad of paper that comes back with me each time, as I



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think it does, would last long enough for me to show it to someone. What would they think then?

"I have become afraid of it. I know why I keep returning. I am trying to get back to an earlier time than that first time I arrived. I once came there later; maybe this too can happen. But I am afraid of what may happen then, and a fear keeps growing in me that one of these times I may not return at all.

"That is why I have written this and put it in an envelope to be delivered to you if I should disappear. I want you to know what happened. I have lost all perspective. I don't know if this should be made public. I leave it to you.

"I know only that Vacameth's prophecy is coming true, for I am slowly losing all remembrance of that which has become most precious to me . . . the memory of this poem and its completion. One line alone remains . . . *'To tempt the dangerous deep, while total darkness overspreads the skies . . .*

Your friend,
Eric"

When Marshall had finished the last page, he put them all together and placed them face down on the table. He took his glasses and began to polish them, and after a time he cleared his throat. "Well," he said, "what do you make of it?"

"I don't know."

"You believe it?"

I shrugged. "Maybe he's gone crazy," I said. "The whole thing gives me the creeps. We ought to find him."

"You have any idea where to look?"

At this point we both heard someone in the empty bedroom. I got up and opened the door, and there was Eric, sitting up in bed and rubbing his eyes. I switched on the lights.

"Damn you!" he yelled. "Turn off those lights!" He peeped out from between he hands and jumped out of bed. "Pete!" he cried, happily, "You old son of a gun! Where the hell have you been keeping yourself? What brings you back to Sleepy Hollow?"

"I got a few days off," I grinned. "Thought I'd see you."

"Swell, just swell! How long you been here? I thought I heard voices out there a few minutes ago."

"Professor Marshall came up with me. We sat outside."

"You should have wakened me, dope." He stuck his head through the doorway. "Hello, Professor. I'll be out as soon as I get a pair of shoes on."

He came out blinking and stretching. "Wow, am I groggy, Pete," he yawned. Then he screwed up his face in surprise and pulled a little wad of paper from his mouth. "What the hell is this?" he said. "Have I taken to chewing paper while I'm asleep?"

He aimed it carelessly at an ashtray. It missed and fell to the floor, and Erick began knotting his tie. But Marshall and I had both turned casually to look at the paper on the floor, and as we looked at it . . . it just disappeared. One minute it was there, the next minute the worn carpet was bare.

"Hey!" Eric cried, pounding my back. "What are you choking on?"

"Guess I swallowed wrong," I mumbled. "Whew!"

"Feel better?"

"Yeah," I said slowly, "better than you look, because you look like hell. You must've lost twenty pounds since Easter."

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 97)



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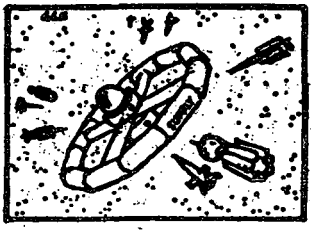

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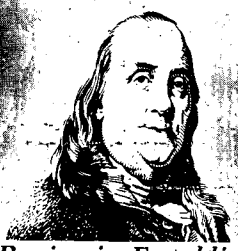

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